

FICTION

## BELL

Eric Roe

His death would be famous, and it would be mis-told. That is what Bell knew in between the head wound and the gunshot. He was embarrassed that it should end this way. He put up a fight. There was blood in his eyes. Billy got the revolver from Bell's holster, leaned in, and said quickly, "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't have to, Bell." One iron bracelet of his cuffs was still locked around his wrist; the other dangled loose at the end of the chain. There was blood on its edge, strands of dark hair. There would be no one to tell it but Billy. "If he'd have just cooperated," he'd say. Bell would be the guileless idiot who was taken in by Billy's charm and done in by his own gullibility. The country bumpkin who let Billy the Kid escape. His blood was making a pool around his head and soaking into the floorboards. It would stay there a long time. Bell wanted to say a few words in his defense. He wanted to tell them out there what the record should be. Billy was turning out Bell's pocket to look for a key to the remaining cuff, and Bell pushed him off, tried to blink the blood out of his eyes as he headed down the stairs. Billy put a bullet through his side. Bell crashed out the door and staggered toward the caretaker, fell forward into the old man's arms. That man's shocked face the last he would ever see. There was a word on Bell's lips. He never got to say it.

SOMEONE WAS PLAYING "ROCK OF AGES" on a hand-cranked organ, and reverent voices sang the words. This confused him. Whose wounded side were they singing about? His? *When mine eyes shall close in death*, they sang. *When I soar to worlds unknown*. He was soaring over their heads on the piano's cranked notes. He was soaring over a small gray monument that bore his name and the name of his killer. He was soaring up a stairway and over floorboards that still held his blood. On out the window, out over the wide other landscape, over mountains and rivers. There was an Apache being dragged away by a horse, the Indian's foot sticking up above the

saddle. A hand held out to him a hairy scalp dripping blood. A storm was coming, or it was here, it had never gone. He was soaring back over his life.

HE'D BEEN A TEXAS RANGER FOR JUST TWO MONTHS. He didn't talk about it, but everyone seemed to know anyway. It was the scar on his face. Every new person who saw it would inquire about it and be told by some local that it had happened when Bell was a Ranger. It's what drew Oscar Williams to him in the first place, though Williams was tactful enough not to mention the scar. He mentioned only that he was a prospector organizing a small party to ride with him from Dallas to Colorado. "Your status as a former Ranger would offer a comfortable degree of safety to the party," Williams told him. That Bell had only briefly been a Ranger did not seem to bother Williams. Bell didn't have to think about it long. Dallas was getting crowded. He had half-hearted ideas about saving up to buy a farm because he couldn't think of anything else to do. He did not want to return to law enforcement. He'd been going out on mining jobs. It was hard work, and it had occurred to him many times that prospecting for himself instead of for someone else might be more rewarding. Williams was presenting an opportunity. Bell signed on.

He was twenty-six, same as Williams. He felt old already. He was eleven when Sherman burned Atlanta. Long, winding line of evacuees leaving the city, Bell and his mother perched precariously on a wagon with a cracked wheel, the smoke choking them when the wind blew it their way. His father walked alongside the wagon and kept telling his mother not to look back, but Bell looked plenty of times. Inferno of a city, roiling black smoke turning day to night. They'd sat under a table praying during the shelling. He'd seen a severed leg lying in the street, and he'd spent minutes looking at it, trying to decide if it was a man's or a woman's. He'd already heard enough weeping for a lifetime. The burning city failed to make an impression on him; it seemed the only way things could have ended after all that had already happened. But as soon as he was of age, he put distance between himself and his ruined home state. Texas seemed infinite, its possibilities endless. He could lose himself there, create himself anew. But violence kept finding him, and he took a silver star badge to try to fight it, and it fought alongside and through him instead.

Roose holding the dripping scalp out to him, saying, "Take it, Bell. It's your kill. You have earned it."

Now he was moving toward possibility again. Another attempt at leaving behind all that he did not want in his life. Colorado. He said the name quietly to himself as he dressed that morning. He said it gently to his mare as he saddled her. It was a pleasant name whose syllables undulated stream-like over the tongue. It held none of the harshness of *Texas*. Colorado, he said, and it became the word he would use to calm his mare as the party made its way overland.

WILLIAMS WAS KEEPING A JOURNAL of his experiences. "Reticent," he said, glancing up at Bell. "I think that's the word for you." Bell shrugged. He wasn't sure what the word meant. He didn't really care at the time how he was described in someone's writing. "Where are you from, Bell?" Williams asked.

Bell nodded toward home, said, "Back East."

Williams squinted at him and nodded. He wrote in his journal again. "Soft-spoken," he said. "That's how I'll term it."

The attorney nodded in agreement, but he proposed an addendum: "Watchful."

"Which is why I brought him." Williams finished writing a sentence, smiled up at Bell from under his drooping mustache. Bell gave another shrug, and true to the attorney's characterization, he looked out at the darkening plain and toward the mountains.

They had stopped for the night. Aside from the attorney, the others in Williams's party were a couple of recent Harvard graduates raring for adventure, and an ex-Confederate soldier who served as wagon driver and cook. Bell was wary of the Harvard boys. Right now they were sitting a little distance away, trading fictions about Indians. One seemed to fancy the idea of being rescued Pocahontas-style and taking an exotic Indian bride back to Cambridge. If he'd been the type to do so, Bell would have laughed at them. There was no Pocahontas out here. The Apaches knew better. They had no illusions that a peaceful agreement could be reached whereby they would keep their land, and they would not go quietly. Their version of Pocahontas would as soon slit the Harvard boys' throats, and they would never even see her to be conquered by her beauty. As for the

ex-soldier, Bell did not want to give away his own Georgia accent and find himself assailed with war stories. He kept to himself and kept watch. Williams had brought him for protection, and Bell resolved to do his best in that capacity by keeping undistracted.

THE SCAR MADE A JAGGED LINE across his left cheek, from the corner of his mouth to the top of his ear. Her name wasn't Pocahontas. Bell looked up at the stars as he lay in his blankets near the fire after his turn at watch was done. Colorado. He mouthed the word.

They didn't go to Colorado in the end. They went to New Mexico. They stopped at a small settlement called Tascosa to spend the night. The hotel was combined with a store and saloon. Williams went inside to arrange for their rooms, and after a time he came back out smiling. "New Mexico," he said. "The Cerrillos Mountains." A new mining district had been discovered there. It was rich in carbonates. This news made the carbonate beds of Colorado seem abstract to Williams; here was something specific and verified, but also new. The attorney and the Harvard boys agreed quickly that the Cerrillos Mountains should be their new objective, and the ex-soldier was only along for the journey anyway and couldn't care less where it ended. Bell turned and looked northward. Shadows of mountains. He ran his hand down his mare's black mane. It was senseless to get too attached to an idea, especially that of some kind of Promised Land. Those didn't exist. But there was a tightness in his chest.

"You'll continue with us, of course," Williams said.

Bell nodded. "Of course. It's all the same," he said.

The saloon was populated by seven men who grew rowdy upon the entrance of Williams and his party. They wanted to buy drinks for the newcomers. They offered seats at tables. They offered to deal them into the card game already in progress, or to start a satellite game to accommodate them. Predatory smiles, naked motivations. Guns on their hips. Williams and the attorney politely declined, kept right on going toward the rooms, and the ex-soldier didn't even bother to reply. Only the Harvard boys lingered on the precipice of temptation. Bell entered last, and when the boys glanced back at him, he shook his head. Understanding blanketed their excitement, and they continued to their rooms.



NEW MEXICO. What exactly would be new about it? And *Mexico* had the same harshness carried by the syllables of *Texas*. The Apaches ranged across all this land; New Mexico was just a continuum of Texas to them. It was all land that should remain theirs and would not, and they would keep fighting for it anyway. They would keep killing and dying. “Two months?” the sergeant said when Bell handed in his badge. “She didn’t cut you that bad. Even if she did, men fear scars. She has given you a gift.”

“She gave me something, all right,” Bell said. When the sergeant wouldn’t take the badge from his hand, Bell let it drop on the table.

There were two dried scalps in his saddlebag. He didn’t know what to do with them.

WILLIAMS AND HIS PARTY LEFT Tascosa without incident, disappointing the men in the saloon yet again when they declined to take a drink, sit in on a game. Later in the day, the party was overtaken by a stagecoach. They stood their horses out of its way, and the ex-soldier guided the wagon to the side to let the coach pass. The driver spoke briefly with Williams. When he heard that they’d just left Tascosa earlier in the day, the driver said their timing had been fortuitous: the saloon at the hotel where they’d stayed had erupted in violence, and it must’ve only been an hour after Williams and his party had left. Two men were killed, and the barkeep took a stray ball in the gut. Williams was sorry to hear it. When he asked about the cause, the driver shook his head and said bluntly, “Drinking and gambling.”

Bell glanced back at the Harvard boys. They looked both relieved and disappointed. Their chance to get into a real-life bar fight, gone. They started discussing which of the men they’d seen would have been involved, which of them had likely started whatever the fight was about, which had been first to pull his gun. The very act of discussing would bring to it a logic Bell knew had likely been absent from the real thing. May as well ask the guns why they wouldn’t keep from firing.

THEY CROSSED INTO NEW MEXICO and a while later stopped over at a village on the banks of the Pecos River. Even as they rode in, they were

regarded with suspicion by the Mexican population. Stony expressions, some openly hostile. Eyes moving from the faces of Williams and his men to their guns. They might have kept going—they did not feel welcome—but they’d traveled all day over a barren landscape. The river was clean and cool and bordered with green gardens. Their horses and mules were tired. Their only compromise was to set up camp near the river rather than looking for lodging at a hacienda or some such.

A small group of Mexicans gathered not far off to watch the travelers settle in. It made the Harvard boys and the attorney nervous, and Williams amplified his cheeriness to cover whatever unease he felt. The ex-soldier had early on established that he was more interested in the welfare of his mules than people of any color, and he carried on in that oblivious fashion now. Bell remained cool and alert. He climbed down from his mare, unfastened the saddle. The Mexicans watched carefully. He could hear them talking to each other, hear some of what they said: “*¿Ves aquellas rifles? ¿Ves aquellas armas? Mira la cicatriz de su cara,*” one said, drawing a line with his finger from his ear to the corner of his mouth, and the one next to him nodded.

Williams stopped next to Bell, gave a theatrical sigh, grabbed his own coat lapels. “Quite the journey!” he exclaimed.

“It’s good to have water,” Bell said.

Williams smiled, then leaned in close. “What are they saying? Can you hear them?” he whispered.

Bell glanced back at the Mexicans. He said, “They noticed the scar on my face.”

“Is that significant?” Williams asked.

“They will want to discuss how a man might get a scar like this. They might have theories about it.”

Williams thought about that. “They think you are an outlaw?”

“That might be one theory.” He hoisted the saddle from his mare’s back and laid it over a rock. “It’s possible they have heard already about what happened at Tascosa. That news may have arrived here already.”

“And since we are coming from that direction,” Williams said, adding it up. He nodded solemnly.

Bell and his fellow travelers felt the suspicion webbing around them as they set up camp. The group of villagers broke up after a while, the

Mexicans going back to their work or their conversations. But now and then Bell would catch them glancing at the travelers, see them pointing. “*Diablos Tejanos*,” he heard one say. That was a nickname Bell had heard before.

Only the ex-soldier got much sleep that night. Williams and the attorney and the Harvard boys sat up late, talking around the fire. Bell was kept awake by their nervous chatter, but he lay as if sleeping. He kept his back to the fire so that his night vision could allow him to see into the village, and he could see that they were being watched all night long. The Mexicans seemed to be taking turns in groups of three or four, spread out at various points. They did not appear to be armed but with farming tools and such. Their positions, Bell understood, were defensive.

The voices from the fire drifted into the night, the words unraveling into intangibility as they reached him. But at one point the voices lowered, and Bell instinctively paid attention. “I asked him about his time as a Ranger,” he heard the attorney say. Someone asked what the response had been. The attorney said, “He would not talk about it. Is that where he got the scar?”

Williams spoke quietly: “Who’s to say he didn’t get it when he was just a boy? A farming accident. A horse’s hoof.”

“He likes to wrap himself in mystery,” the attorney said. “It makes him seem dangerous.”

“He doesn’t seem dangerous,” one of the Harvard boys said. “He seems capable.”

Williams whispered, “If you want the truth, it’s humility. He was only a Ranger for two months. He does not talk about it because it was such a short time and he thinks it wasn’t enough to live up to the glory that everyone would associate with the job.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“Only when I pressed him. It seems a satisfactory explanation.”

Their voices faded again. Bell let them fade. He watched the Mexicans watching him. Sometimes, the Mexicans spoke to each other, but their voices didn’t carry. The valley was blue in the moonlight, and the night was cool. Bell imagined himself staying here, farming. A pretty Mexican wife. An adobe hut. He imagined himself at peace. He imagined himself into sleep.



THE MEXICANS WERE STILL WATCHING at dawn, and the few watchers gradually became a group of many again as the sun rose and Williams and his party packed up. The villagers were openly hostile now, not bothering to hide it. As if they had discussed deep into the night whether the party warranted hostility and they had come to an ironclad conclusion that, yes, hostility was the appropriate attitude. They were speaking amongst themselves, not bothering to whisper anymore. “*¡Vete al infierno!*” one particularly grizzled villager shouted, and when Williams and the others looked his way, he spat on the ground.

Williams stepped next to Bell. He wasn’t trying to pretend cheeriness this morning. “As soon as your horse is saddled,” he said, “I think it might pacify the situation just a bit if you could mount up and hold your rifle at ready and let your six-gun show in its holster.”

“I will. They won’t attack, though. They just want us to leave.”

“We are obliging them.” Williams started back toward his own horse, but he paused. “Let them see your scar,” he said. He blushed, but didn’t apologize. “It might add to the level of intimidation.”

The Mexicans didn’t attack, but they followed the party to the edge of the village. There were a couple more insults shouted. Someone threw a stone, but it fell wide of any target. Bell took up the rear. An obstacle against the Mexicans, of course, but also an obstacle should any of the party let fear or anger overtake him and try to turn back and open fire. Williams had chosen men with cool heads; they wouldn’t make such a move. But Bell had ridden with men who would not have needed much more cause to go back and kill every one of the villagers. The instinct to guard against this was slow to fade.

THEY WEREN’T BUT TWO HOURS FROM THE VILLAGE when a passing merchant took Williams aside and spoke to him gravely as Bell and the others sat their horses, watching and waiting. The merchant rode on, and Williams walked his horse back to report. “It would seem the Mexicans thought they had good reason for their behavior,” he said. “They apparently believed us to be members of Billy the Kid’s gang, and there is talk—” Here, he paused

to search for an appropriate way to put it. "There is talk of waylaying us in some canyon ahead."

One of the Harvard boys was incredulous. "That bunch? With what? Shovels and hoes?"

"You ever been hit with a shovel, boy?" the ex-soldier grumbled.

"It likely wouldn't be them," Bell said. "They would call on friends."

"Armed friends?" the attorney asked.

Bell nodded.

The members of the party looked at each other as if searching for clues as to how to react to the news. The ex-soldier broke the silence to ask, "Anyway, who the hell is Billy the Kid?"

They all looked to Williams for an explanation. "I am told that he is a cattle rustler and brutal murderer of some renown in Lincoln County, which is to the south. It would appear that his fame has spread beyond that area."

The Harvard boys seemed to want to be impressed at having been mistaken for outlaws, but the sobered mood of the others kept their excitement muted. Bell reached up, removed his hat, rubbed the top of his head absently. Despite the desert sun, he felt cold and wondered momentarily if he was coming down with a fever. The feeling passed, and he replaced his hat.

Glancing at Bell, Williams continued, "I am told that they were also worried, ironically, that the Texas Rangers would come and that there would be a fight too close to the village. They call the Rangers the 'Texas Devils.' All of this explains quite a lot."

"Bandits, outlaws, and Indians," the ex-soldier grumbled, "and we get attacked by Mexican peasants."

"Their *bandito* friends," Bell emphasized. "This other outlaw gang would be competition. The *banditos* will reward the villagers for alerting them."

The party moved on cautiously. Bell volunteered to ride out front as a scout, and Williams was happy to let him do it. The ex-soldier had one of the Harvard boys ride in the back of the wagon so he could watch the rear. They all held their weapons at ready. The hills afforded any number of spots for a possible ambush. Any bend in the trail, any pass, any wooded area. Bell was not optimistic about their chances in the event of an attack. He was not with the kind of men who would have no compunctions about killing, even if justified.

Violence kept finding him. He was drawn somehow to it, or it was drawn to him. The weapons he carried. The jobs he undertook with the knowledge that he might have to use violence to fight violence, and therefore violence would look for him, and as a Ranger he had looked for it with the others.

Ambushes. He and the Rangers had lain in wait in a dry hollow. A band of Apaches had been gathered not far from a church where a service was in progress. Hearing news of this, the minister stopped the service, and every man who had a gun stood outside, waiting, but the Apaches didn't come.

Bell wondered if the church had ever even been a thing they had considered, and he thought probably it wasn't. But the Rangers were sent after them anyway, and Bell followed his orders. They waited for the Apaches to ride by, and then they charged out of the hollow and gave chase. By the time they were within fighting range, the Apaches had led them to a spot where more Indians lay among the grass, their rifles ready, and the Rangers rode into a barrage of fire. They had to dismount, use their horses as shields. The fight was fierce. Bell heard hooves behind him and turned to see a painted horse that carried an Apache who was in the act of thrusting his spear toward Bell's chest. Bell shot him in the forehead. The Apache's arm continued its downward arc and embedded the spear in the ground, and the Apache fell partway from his horse before becoming tangled. The horse dragged him away, and the Rangers saw the Apache's foot sticking up above the saddle and laughed to each other. The other Apaches were fleeing, and the Rangers did not give chase. The fight was done.

The only Apache remaining was a young woman whose dead horse had fallen on her leg. Gillam and another Ranger marched toward her. Bell was dazed by the spear sticking in the ground at his feet. He looked around for the Apache he'd killed. The horse was standing not far away, the Apache's leg still sticking up above the saddle, and Roose was walking toward him with a large knife. The woman's voice drew Bell's attention. Gillam was going up under her clothes, and the woman was speaking hatefully in her language while he held her by the wrists. She did not cry or scream.

Bell looked for the sergeant and saw the sergeant pointedly turn his back on the scene. "Gillam," Bell said. He stepped around his horse

and walked over to where the woman was pinned down by horse and man. “We’re Rangers, Gillam,” he said because he still thought it meant something. He pulled Gillam back by the shoulder, pushed him away. Gillam’s face a confused map of betrayal. He couldn’t figure out why Bell had stopped him, and Bell could see that he was trying to do the math and was genuinely puzzled.

“We’re Rangers,” Bell said again. He squatted by the woman to see if she was all right, and she slashed his face open with a knife she’d concealed and then spit at him as blood ran down into his shirt. Bell reeled back, just as confused as Gillam had been. Her words coming at him with defiance and hatred. She held the knife ready to slash anyone else who came near. Gillam stepped over and aimed at her face and her head snapped back and hit the ground with a crack that echoed the gunshot. The Ranger took the knife from her hand and bent over her.

Bell staggered back toward his horse. He didn’t understand what had happened. His hand over his wound, the blood running down his arm into his sleeve. He could not speak. Two men sat him down. One saw to his wound, pulling Bell’s hand away from it while the other talked to him. Bell did not know what the other said. He found himself at some point holding a bunched-up cloth to his cheek while others conferred.

Roose stepped up to him with a dripping scalp dangling from his fingers. “He was a chief’s son,” Roose said. “You can tell by the designs they painted on the horse.” He held the scalp out. “Take it, Bell,” he said. “It’s your kill. You have earned it.”

And Bell took it. There was blood on his hand from his own wound, and the blood dripped down the silky black hair and into the scalp. He gazed at it, uncomprehending. Then Gillam came over with another and held it out. “You may as well have hers too,” Gillam said. And Bell had been riding around with both scalps now long dried in his saddlebag, and he did not know why he had them or what he should do with them. But the dead woman’s words rode with him. “*Gojéí dásí’índíyá`ijóosíná’a*,” she had said. Bell did not know the meaning of the words, but they followed him everywhere he went, and even now on the trail with Williams and his party the words were with him.



THEY REACHED THE MINING CAMP at the foot of the Cerrillos Mountains without falling victim to any ambush. The party disbanded, and Bell stayed on with Williams for awhile to do some prospecting of his own. On occasional Sundays, Governor Lew Wallace would stop by to visit another group that was headquartered near where Williams had put down stakes, and Williams and Bell would sometimes sit in and listen to Wallace’s stories. Governor Wallace was a writer—he’d published a novel called *The Fair God*, and he was working on a new one about a Roman soldier seeking revenge and ultimately finding redemption at the foot of Christ’s cross. Williams enjoyed the stories, but Bell was restless. The mining camp was made up of tents and shacks, a few dugouts, and the prospectors had given it the name Carbonateville, but it couldn’t help but seem anything but temporary. This was not a place to stay. Every morning when Bell woke, he felt the tug of an unfinished journey. He made some money over the summer, but this was not enough to sustain him. He sometimes found himself absently running a finger the length of his scar. His head ached. She was forever saying those words to him. In his dreams she came and spat at him and he asked her what the words meant, and she said nothing but the words again and again. He turned his cheek to her. Gillam held out her scalp. The church congregants went back to their service. They sang “The Old Rugged Cross.” They sang that it was an emblem of suffering and shame. Bell knew something about that.

“There is a story behind that scar,” Governor Wallace said to Bell once. A rare instance of turning his attention away from himself on one of his Sunday visits.

Everyone in the shack turned back to look at Bell. Williams shifted uncomfortably beside him, sympathetic. He seemed about to speak for Bell.

“There is a story,” Bell said, “but I only know this one piece of it. It goes far beyond me.”

That only piqued Wallace’s interest. “Tell us that one piece, then,” he said.

“You believe in a fair God?” Bell asked him.

“It is a fact. It doesn’t require my belief to be so.”

Bell didn’t have anything to say to the governor after that. He nodded politely, got up and left the shack without a word. He didn’t go back for any more of Governor Wallace’s visits. He worked the hills. He heard words on the wind. The words were not speaking about a fair God.



BELL LEFT CARBONATEVILLE EARLY in the fall. Williams had already returned to Dallas at the end of the summer, so there was no one to notice Bell's leaving. It eased his mind to be away from the crowded camp. He felt at home, a solitary speck in the immensity of the desert mountain landscape. He was not heading for Colorado, but in his solitude here it seemed possible that any direction would offer the chance of a new beginning.

Two nights out a storm came. It was unexpected. The mare had given no signs of sensing it, and typically she could sense storms hours off. But Bell was restless that night. It took him a long time to get to sleep, and when he finally did, there were dreams waiting for him. The way her head snapped back. The way the chief's son jerked back and fell at an awkward angle dictated only by the physics of dead weight. His foot in the air as his horse dragged him off. The defiance in the woman's face. Bell did not go and look at her afterwards. He did not need to; she always found him here in his sleep, and she slashed and spat at his face. As the blood ran down his throat, she smiled and said, “*Isdzánádleeshén`iléńzińá'a.*” She was standing above him; a downed horse had his legs pinned. His cheek flapped in the wind. Her feet stepped to an unheard rhythm; she raised her arms and danced around him, making a circle with bare feet in the dirt. “*Naaná'azhishná'a,*” she said. He realized that an arrow was embedded in his heart. He was staked to the ground. He realized that when she said *Gojéí dásí'ihndiyá`ijóósíná'a*, she was talking about the arrow in his heart. The words were clear in his dream. When he was awake, they eluded him; he could ask no one what they meant because he could not call them back to his memory. One word only: *Gojéí*. A tracker in Dallas told him what it meant: *your heart*. My heart? Bell had asked. The tracker shrugged: *your heart, my heart, his heart, her heart. Somebody's goddamned heart.* She danced around him. She ripped the arrow out of his chest and said, “*Gojéí dásí'ihndiyá`ijóósíná'a*” and plunged the arrow back again. She repeated this, made it part of her dance. Blood ran in rivulets from her hairline and striped her face. The congregants were singing. Her head snapped back and cracked against the ground, and that was the sound Bell woke to. It was the rip-rap-crack of rain and hail pelting his tent in violent waves

spurred on by howling wind. He heard his mare snort and blinked himself awake.

The mare was hobbled, and Bell put a blanket over his head to go out into the dark and talk to her and hold her reins so that she would not panic and injure herself. A sudden gust tore the tent from all but one of its stakes so that it whipped through the air like a battle-tattered flag and spilled what was under it across the rain-soaked plain. The mare whinnied and shook her head, tried just twice to lift her forelegs, and then she stood still. The hail died out quickly and had never been large enough to sting, but the rain and wind kept on. There was no place to shelter. Bell tried to look out across the plain, but he could only see the sheets of rain waving in the wind's gales and creating strange shadows.

Her face was there in the shadows. It was streaked with blood and rain. Her dark eyes pinning him down. He could hear the howl of her words in the wind.

Bell patted his mare and told her something reassuring. He dropped the blanket and walked through the mud until he found the saddlebag. He opened it, dug beneath everyday items, dug down to the bottom until his fingers touched hair. Still silky—he would not have expected that. It had been a couple of years since he had allowed himself to reach far enough down into the bag to touch it. He pulled both scalps out and turned into the wind. Rain stung his face, pricked against his scar. He walked into the rain, away from his mare and scattered encampment, and he raised his arms and held the scalps up to the sky, one in each hand. He did not know whether he expected lightning to strike down his arms or if he expected their ghosts to slice off his hands in retrieval of their scalps. He did not know if he should expect anything. He stood holding the scalps up to the sky's thunderous fury. They whipped and slapped against his wrists until finally he let go and the wind took them; they were gone, vanished instantly into the shadows of rain and lightning, disappeared into the ceaseless howling wind.

Bell lowered his arms. He turned back toward his mare. There was some kind of disappointment in him for a moment. He realized he had wanted to see the scalps flutter away and maybe to think of them as having turned into ravens ascending, but he did not see them and they were not ravens.

The mare was watching him. She shivered, shook her head, attempted to step out of the hobble. He returned to her, spoke softly. “*Gojéí,*” he said. He couldn’t help but lean against her, finding himself exhausted. It felt as if he had walked out and back much farther than a few hundred feet. It felt as if he had been walking for years.

THEY NEVER WOULD BE RAVENS. They would always be exactly what they were.

The dreams faded and stopped after another couple of months, but he heard the words now and again. It would be out on the plain, or coming awake, or in the empty echoes of a mine shaft, and there would always be just that one that he could catch and articulate. At least that one. It would follow him to his new home in White Oaks, New Mexico, it would be with him when Pat Garrett asked his help in tracking down and then guarding Billy the Kid, and it would be with him at the top of the stairs when Billy caved in Bell’s skull with a loose manacle. When he blinked blood out of his eyes to look up into Billy’s businesslike and even somewhat apologetic face, Bell’s own language would escape him—he would not be able to put voice to any single thought that careened through his head in those last moments. But there would be the one word that would not escape him and would encompass everything the others could not. It was a pronouncement. It was wishful thinking. It was a curse, a prophecy, an incantation, a lament. It was the word he took with him into death, and it would be his excuse or his condemnation, and they would ask him over there if it was his only word, and he would say, “Yes, it’s the only one I’ve got, it’s all there is, but it isn’t mine.”



One summer it was okay for girls  
to hold hands with girls. The next,  
our mothers said it wasn’t, yet  
all that had changed were our  
bodies, which strained everything,  
made our friends’ brothers  
make fun of how full our bathing

suits suddenly were, then try  
to put their hands in them; got  
our male cousins, who started  
to pay attention, to beat up  
a couple of smartmouths  
we could have handled  
ourselves. How we wished

we could swim back through  
the months, to unmake the very  
second when everyone older  
first thought sex toward us kids,  
to surface with our girl friends like  
silvery fish under the moon who  
were never expected to spawn.