

Winter Light

Jesus Out to Sea

by James Lee Burke, 1936–

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For Paul and Muilee Pai

He lived alone at the head of the canyon in a two-story log house that controlled the access to the national forest area behind his property. His house was built up on a slope above a creek that flowed down from a chain of lakes high up on the plateau, and from his writing desk at his second-story window he could look out over the wide sweep of valley below and see the snow blowing out of the ponderosa on the crests of the hills and the sharply etched tracks of deer that had gone down to drink in the stream during the night. He could also see the long black scar of a road that wound its way up from the interstate, past the one working ranch left in the valley, to the foot of his property, and finally to the public woods behind his house.

The sunlight was red on the snow, the shadows already purple in the trees, the wind colder and flecked with ice crystals against the window glass, and he knew the hunters would be there soon. They almost always came in the late afternoon, because it was only a ten-mile drive from town and with a little luck they could get in a few shots before the official close of the hunter's day thirty minutes after sunset.

He was fifty-eight and he had taken early retirement from his position as a literature professor at the university, but he had no interest in the activities of retirement or people his own age. Most of his friends were college students, and in one way or another his property always seemed marked more by their presence than his: tepee poles stacked against his toolshed, the willow-stick outline of a sweat lodge by the creek, a communal vegetable garden whose rows were now frozen into iron ridges.

A red Toyota jeep, as bright against the snow as a fire engine, ground in four-wheel drive up the road, then slowed as the driver and his passenger peered through their ice-streaked windows at the signs fastened to the trunks of larch trees at the foot of the professor's property:

THIS IS A PRIVATE ROAD
NO HUNTING
NO SHOOTING
NO TRESPASSING

But they drove on anyway, and he met them outside his door, with a cup of coffee in his hand, in his worn corduroy pants, lace-on boots, and flannel shirt. He had played basketball for LSU, and he was tall and angular, bareheaded in the wind, his skin red and coarse with the cold.

He was not unkind to them. He never was. Sometimes he invited them inside; usually they simply went away, confused or mildly irritated. But these two were different. The passenger had a dark light in his face and wore an untrimmed beard and spit regularly in the snow. His hands were square and big and seamed with dirt, and he opened and closed them impatiently. The driver was a fat man who wore three shirts that hung outside his pants, galoshes, a neon-orange hunter's vest, and a narrow skinning knife in a scabbard on his side. He smiled while he talked, but his eyes did not go with his face.

The professor, whose name was Roger Guidry, listened to the driver talk, his slender fingers wrapped around his coffee cup, his head nodding absently as he scraped at the snow with the tip of his boot. Then, when the overweight man had finished, he said, "You can walk in from the other side and hunt, if you want."

"The other side?" the driver said.

"Yes."

"How far a walk is that?"

"Fifteen miles."

"Fifteen miles," the driver said, nodding his head up and down. "Fifteen miles in snow, you're saying?"

"That's right."

"I told you we're bow hunters. We're not going to put a bullet into somebody's house or shoot somebody's cows."

"I know that."

"Listen—" the driver said.

The passenger hit him on the arm and said, "Forget it. Let's go."

"Just a minute," the driver said. "You're telling me to walk fifteen fucking miles through snow?"

"It's your choice."

"My choice?"

"That's right."

"I've heard about you."

"Oh?" Roger said.

"Yeah. I just didn't know it was this canyon."

"I see."

"We've still got time to go up the Blackfoot. Forget this guy," the passenger said.

The driver put an unlit cigarette in his mouth and looked around the yard as though he were deciding something. Then he laughed, lit his cigarette, and looked off down the valley.

"Too much," he said. Then they both got in the jeep, backed it around in the snow, cracking an old tomato stake in the vegetable garden, and crunched down the road over their own long lines of stenciled tire tracks.

The coffee cup was cold in the professor's hand. He looked down at the creek that flowed out of the dark stands of pine and fir in the national forest. In the center the riffle was a deep blue-green between sheets of ice that looked like teeth. Through the willow frame of the sweat lodge he could see two smooth, round boulders that always reminded him of a woman's breasts, and behind them a bark-less and polished cottonwood that beavers had toppled into the stream to form an eddying pool whose pebbled bottom was always marbled with the shapes of cutthroat and brookie trout. In the spring and summer he and the students would fish the pool, have community dinners among the ferns on the bank, and pack far into the canyon, where the cinnamon bears and white-tailed deer were never hunted and bighorn sheep grazed through the saddles high up on the peaks.

The frozen trunks of the ponderosas creaked in the wind, powdering snow in the twilight.

In the spring, he thought.

He didn't remember at which particular stage of his dissatisfaction with university life he had decided to take early retirement. Others had tried to dissuade him—he was a wonderful teacher, he would be hurt financially, he would be missed by his students. And there was truth in what they said, but he had reached the age, he told himself, when he no longer had to apologize or defend.

Maybe it had been the interminable department and committee meetings, the jealousies and hatreds that his colleagues kept alive like green wounds for decades, the self-anointed liberals whose pension plans were invested in nuclear energy, South Africa, and the Boeing Company. He tried, at least in his own mind, not to be hard on them, but in reality they filled him with a visceral disgust. There was often a sneer in their laughter, an atmosphere of bitterness and personal failure in their meeting rooms that was almost palpable, like the smell of fear. They denigrated anyone who accomplished anything and tried to sabotage any educational innovation that threatened their own meager positions. If any of them had acquired any wisdom in their years as educators, he had yet to see the instance.

No, he did remember when he made his decision to hang it up. A search committee had to meet during the Christmas holidays to choose from a huge file of applicants for a vacant position. The chair of the committee, Waldo Gates, and one of his allies, consistently gave low ratings to the most qualified candidates and high ratings to people with no publications and little experience. Waldo Gates, who lived across the creek from Roger, was also a hunter. He had even worn his mail-order camouflage fatigues and brown corduroy shooting vest to the meeting. His friend was dressed for the hunt, too, and both of them kept looking at their watches. After they had just sandbagged a Ph.D. from Stanford who had published two collections of critical essays, it was obvious to Roger that the department was about to hire an underqualified and frightened young woman who would be easily controlled by Waldo and his coterie, and Waldo and his committee ally would soon be duck-hunting at the reservoir south of town.

Waldo was sitting at the desk in the front of the room. He wore a red chin beard and horn-rimmed glasses low on his nose. His eyes were lime green, the size of dimes, and they never blinked when they looked over the top of his glasses at someone, which gave him the appearance of candor and directness and which always intimidated students and younger faculty members.

He held a file folder gingerly between his fingers and clicked it up and down on the desk. "I think we've found the lady we need here," he said. "And it seems to me we have more or less a majority agreement on that, soooooo"—his eyes roved over the five other faces in the room, and two junior faculty members glanced away—"unless anyone else has anything to say, we can be on our way."

"Going out to make things fall down, are you?" Roger said.

"I beg your pardon," Waldo said.

"Have you guys ever thought about an open season on people? You could establish these big reserve areas enclosed by electric fences where y'all could go inside and hunt each other for, say, three or four days at a time. Blow blood, brains, and hair all over the bushes and have a fine time. Except it'd be a genuine sport because the prey would have guns, too. What do you think, Waldo?"

"I think your cause is silly and your personal life needs some attention." Waldo's eyes were round and lidless in his soft face.

"Would you care to explain that?" Roger said.

"There's life after divorce. That's why people have divorces. You end a relationship and you go on with your life. You don't lay off your problems on your colleagues."

"Maybe we could talk about that later, Waldo." Roger cleared his throat slightly. "Outside somewhere. I'll keep one hand in my pocket. In fact, I'll turn my back so the position will be more familiar for you."

"I'm glad you've gotten that off your chest, Roger. I'll report your remarks to the dean. Then you can take it up with him. I believe our committee work is done, ladies and gentlemen. Soooooo, unless Dr. Guidry has any more entertaining observations to make, we'll say God bless and good evening."

They left him alone in the room, feeling foolish and wrong. Did he always have to speak his mind, as a child would, he thought, then spend the rest of the day rationalizing his impetuosity? He looked wistfully out the window at the brown, grassy slope of the mountain behind the campus and the thick stands of ponderosa that grew along the crest and through the saddles. The trunks were orange in the sunlight, wet with melted snow, the pine needles as dark and shiny as clusters of splintered blue glass. High up on the wind stream a hawk floated against the thin wafer of pink, winter sun.

Then Roger heard the janitor knock his broom against one of the wood desks. He picked up his briefcase at his foot, smiled politely, and walked across the empty quadrangle to his pickup truck. His vehicle was the only one in the parking lot, and for some illogical reason that fact struck him as significant.

His son was away at Stanford, and his two daughters had started their own lives in Oregon and Minnesota. They came to see him in the summer, usually with friends, and their conversations were alive with subjects that seemed to exist just beyond the borders of his knowledge or his interest. After the divorce he had thought of his wife only with anger, and when the anger passed he could think of nothing except the ringing winter loneliness in his house.

Young women were available, certainly, both out of affection as well as kindness. He woke hard in the morning, throbbing with desire, and he had to sit quietly on the side of his bed in his underwear and force his mind empty of their shapes, their bare thighs and breasts, their lips, their hands that wanted to stroke his sex. But he managed to live celibate, castigating himself in the silence for his prurient thoughts, on one occasion walking far up the canyon in knee-deep snow, beating his arms in the cold, saying, "Bullshit, bullshit." A whitetail doe crisscrossed the trail in front of him, staring back at him with brown, curious eyes.

The morning after the visit of the hunters in the Toyota jeep, he walked outside into the brilliant sunlight reflecting off the snow, the air as sharp and cold inside the lungs as ice water, and began stacking firewood in his wheelbarrow to take back to the house. His malamute, Boomer, who was as big and thick through the middle as a small cinnamon bear, frisked in the snow, snorting down in a

badger hole by the garden, pulling a stick out of the snow and throwing it in the air.

Then Roger saw that it was not a stick, that it was made of aluminum and the flanged steel tip was the point of a hunter's arrow. He caught Boomer by the thick nape of skin on the back of his neck and forced him to release the shaft from his jaws. The point of the arrow felt as sharp as a razor against the ball of his thumb.

It could have come from Waldo's, across the creek, he thought. He looked through the leafless cottonwoods at the stacked hay bales that Waldo and his children used as an archery target. Yes yes yes, Waldo, he thought. Always Waldo. Last summer Waldo had been bothered by a skunk under his woodshed, and he had hired an out-of-work sawyer to tender-trap it inside a vinyl garbage bag. The sawyer had fitted the crimped end of the bag over his exhaust pipe and, while Waldo watched from his window, asphyxiated the animal to make a pair of gloves for Waldo's oldest son.

But Roger well knew the reason for his deliberate remembrance of a past grievance. The arrow didn't come from Waldo's property. Waldo was not a bow hunter, and also the trajectory of the arrow was almost straight down, which meant that it had not bounced off the top of a hay bale and flown across the creek but instead had been fired high into the air so that it would drop cleanly into Roger's yard.

It could have fallen out of their jeep when their doors were opened, he told himself. It could have happened that way. Yes. But he felt his heart clicking against his ribs.

The next day was bright and clear and windless, and the valley was white and dazzling under a bluebird sky. By afternoon, the sun was so warm that the snow had begun to pock in the fields and melt around the base of the ponderosa trunks. All day he waited for them to return. But when the sun finally dropped behind the pines on the valley's western rim and the snowfields turned as purple as a bruise, only one vehicle had come up the county road, Waldo's, carrying Waldo and a graduate teaching assistant, a statuesque blond girl named Gretchen whom Waldo had requested as his grader.

Two days later, right at daybreak, he heard a four-wheel-drive transmission grinding up the road, and when he looked through his window, his breath clouding against the glass, he saw the red Toyota jeep stop at the foot of his property. The two hunters got out with shotguns and empty canvas backpacks, cut through the bare cottonwoods, stepped gingerly across the boulders in the creek, and threaded their way through fences, brush, trees, and an abandoned horse corral at the back of Waldo's property until they reached the trail that led into the national forest.

In minutes he heard their shotguns booming. He put on his glasses and found Waldo's telephone number in the directory. The phone rang a dozen times before Waldo picked up the receiver, his voice full of sleep.

"Waldo, two guys just went through the back of your property," Roger said.

"What guys? What are you talking about?"

"Two hunters. I wouldn't let them into the canyon, so they crossed the creek and climbed through your fences."

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“You want guys with shotguns walking by your back door without permission?”

“So when you see them, tell them to ask. In the meantime I don’t appreciate your waking me up because of your personal problem with hunting. Get some help, Roger, because you’re an ongoing pain in the ass.”

The line went dead, and Roger looked out at the blueness of the morning, the black, leafless shapes of the cottonwoods along the creek bank, heard the deep, booming echo of another shotgun blast up the canyon, and felt the cold pierce his naked feet like nails.

Two hours later the hunters walked out of the canyon in full sunlight, crunching through the sheath of ice and frozen snow along the creek’s edge, their canvas packs fat with dead grouse. The driver, who still wore a skinning knife and galoshes that flopped on his feet, flipped a cigarette across the stream onto Roger’s property, but neither he nor the other man, who had an untrimmed beard and a bitten look in his face, ever glanced in Roger’s direction. Their tracks were jagged in the crusted snow. He heard one of the hunters laugh just before the driver started the jeep engine and ground the transmission into gear as sharply as Coke-bottle glass breaking.

That afternoon he drove into town and bought a forty-foot length of chain, a huge iron bolt and nut, and a Yale lock with two keys. A mile below his property, far down on the county road where he had no legal right to block access to the national forest, he looped one end of the chain around a ponderosa trunk, bolted the links together against the bark, strung the rest of the chain across the road, and locked it to a steel eyelet on an old U.S. Forest Service signpost. Now the only other way to reach the national forest was down Waldo’s private road, and Waldo had a locked, electronic gate across his cattle guard.

The only neighbors who would be affected by the chain across the county road were a hippie carpenter and his girlfriend who lived just below Roger’s place. Roger stopped by their log house, drank a cup of coffee with them, and gave them one of the keys to the padlock. While he explained the reason for the chain, the carpenter and his girlfriend smiled and nodded and rolled joints out of a bowl of reefer on top of a redwood table, and he realized that they were not really listening because they considered his behavior as conventional and expected as their own.

That night, under a full moon that lighted the valley floor like a white flame, he walked down the road in the silence, the soles of his boots squeaking on the snow, and looked at the chain strung between the ponderosa trunk and the signpost. He lifted it up in his palm and bounced it against its tension. The links were heavy and cold and shiny with ice. They felt solid and good in his hand, the way the handle of a weapon probably did to some men. He let the chain slip off his fingers and rock clinking back and forth in the shadows. Far down the valley he could see the glow of headlights from the interstate highway against the clouds.

The season was almost over, he thought. Maybe they would not be back again this year. Maybe the birds had been enough for their pride.

But he knew it wasn’t finished yet. They had found each other, right here, at the end of this valley, and they knew it and so did he.

Late the next afternoon he looked out his window and saw Gretchen, Waldo's grader, stepping carefully on the icy stones in the creek, her arms stretched out for balance, crossing onto his property. The wind was blowing, and her face was red with cold and there were ice crystals in her blond hair. When he opened the door for her, her breath puffed up in a cloud of steam.

"The power went out, and I can't get the generator started," she said.

Her eyes were blue and wide and the wind had made tears in them. He closed the door behind her. Her lug boots and the bottom of her blue jeans were caked with snow.

"Where's Waldo?" he said.

"He went up to the Cabin for a drink."

"What are you doing at his house, Gretchen?"

"He just gave his midterms. He likes me to grade them close by so I can ask him questions if I have to."

Roger had known her since she had entered the English program five years ago. Her father had been a gypo logger who had been killed felling trees over in Idaho, and she lived with her mother in a clapboard house out by the pulp mill, where on a windless day the sweet-sour stench of processed pulp hung in the air like ripe sewage. She worked hard and did well in conventional classes in which the professor rewarded a student's ability to memorize, but she never took creative writing courses, and one way or another she avoided studying with professors whose ideas were eccentric or unpredictable, except for Roger, and he believed she enrolled in his courses only because he never gave anyone a grade lower than C.

"Where's Waldo's wife?" he said.

"She's out of town."

"Are the kids by themselves?"

"They went with her."

"I see. Well," he said, veiling his eyes, "let me turn off the stove and we'll get that generator started."

"We don't have to. He'll be back pretty soon. I can just wait here, can't I?"

"Sure."

"I mean, he won't be long."

"Don't worry about it. Come on upstairs and have some soup with me."

Her rear was tight against her blue jeans when she walked up the steps ahead of him. She took off her sheep-lined coat and hung it on a hook by the wood-burning stove that Roger had made out of an oil drum. Her breasts rose up high against her sweater, and Roger had to look away from her.

"Waldo told his American lit class that Ronald Reagan will probably one day be considered a near-great president," she said.

Roger was silent.

"Some of them put it in their exam papers," she said.

"Ignore it."

"What do you think, I mean about Reagan being near great?"

"I'm retired, Gretchen. I try not to think anymore about what Waldo has to say. Let me get you some soup."

"No, I can do it. I'll fix it for both of us. I'll make coffee, too, if that's all right."

He watched her at the stove, the way her sweater tightened against her back, the thickness of her hair against her neck, her large farm-girl hands.

“What’s a P-38?” she asked.

“A World War Two airplane.”

“No. Waldo’s little boy said his daddy wore a P-38 on a chain around his neck.”

“It’s a GI can opener.”

“Was he in the war or something?” she said.

“No, and neither was Ronald Reagan. Listen, Gretchen, this is important to understand. These kinds of men vicariously revise their lives through the suffering of others. Look, I don’t want to tell you what to think or whom you should listen to...” He stopped and looked down at the backs of his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“You don’t like him because he hunts animals, do you? At least that’s what he thinks.”

“What do you say we eat?”

Her eyes roamed over his face. He felt himself swallow. She widened her eyes and the blue in them intensified, and for just a moment his vanity almost allowed him to believe he was still attractive to a beautiful young woman and his heart raced in his chest in a way that it should not have.

Then he saw her cheeks color and her hand falter on the coffeepot. “What is it?” he asked.

Her gaze reached out the window, out over the short pines and the frozen creek toward Waldo’s house. “He said he pulled a muscle carrying firewood. He said it throbbed all night and he couldn’t sleep. He was standing behind me in the study while I was grading papers, and he had a tube of Ben-Gay in his hand.”

Roger looked away from her face and the shine in her eyes.

“He took off his shirt and sat down next to me. He said, ‘You won’t mind putting just a little bit across my shoulders, will you?’”

“Gretchen, you don’t have to confess anything to me—”

“While I put it on him, he kept saying I was a good girl. He said it over and over.”

“I want you to forget this. You’re a fine person. You don’t have anything to be ashamed of. Just don’t go out to Waldo’s house again. Do your work at the office. If Waldo makes another overture toward you, report it to the dean. I’ll back you up.”

“Am I a weak person? Is that why it was me instead of somebody else?”

“No, you’re brave to work and go to school. You’re brave to put up with the deviousness of older people,” he said, and slipped his arms around her, knowing he shouldn’t, knowing that his judgment and control were coming undone now.

He could feel the wetness of her face against his throat. The thickness in his loins made him close his eyes and hold his breath so he would not see the gold down on the taper of her neck or smell the perfume in her hair.

The chain did not stop them the next morning. They simply drove around it, cracking over the ice, flattening the tree saplings along the creek bank. Then just before they reached Roger’s property, they veered across the creek, scouring deep black tracks along the banks, and bounced over the rocks until they reached Waldo’s horse lot and access to the national forest. Roger watched

through the window as they unloaded a child's sled out of the Toyota's back. The snowfields danced with light, and the plumes from the hunters' mouths were thick and white in the windless air. Then Waldo came out of his back door in a nylon vest, with a battered cowboy hat on his head, and the three men talked like old friends, laughing at something funny, looking in the direction of Roger's house. The hunters had brought scoped rifles this time, and they wore them on shoulder straps and kept shifting the guns' weight on their backs as they talked. They shook hands with Waldo and pulled their sled on a rope up into a heavy green stand of pines in the national forest.

That afternoon the valley was sealed from rim to rim with snow clouds, then a heavy white mist moved across the valley floor until the trees on the hills disappeared inside it. The rick fences and stone walls became as white as the fields, and the creek was recognizable only by a thin electric-blue riffle running through the ice. Thunder boomed through the valley, and when he heard an explosion echo off the cliff walls in the public woods, he tried to tell himself that it was only more thunder.

For some reason, that afternoon, for the first time in his life, he wondered what it would be like to kill someone. He remembered a graduate student he had taught back in the 1960s, a studious but strange kid with myopic, close-set eyes who had probably fried an element or two in his brain with LSD and once told Roger he had spent a morning in the shadows behind his second-floor apartment window, looking through the telescopic sights of an empty rifle at the passersby on the street. When Roger tried and failed to get the boy to see the campus psychologist, he wondered if the acid had inculcated such a sick urge in the boy's head or if it had simply liberated it.

Just before sunset, the sky started to clear and a mauve-colored glow filled the trees on the valley's eastern rim. Roger let Boomer outside, then a few minutes later went outside himself with a propane torch to unfreeze a water line. He saw the hunters come out of the woods on the other side of the creek, dragging their sled across the glazed slickness of the snow. The doe lashed to the sled was so enormous and heavy that both men had to pull on the rope to get the sled up the incline to their jeep. They had already gutted her, and the slit from between her back legs to her throat looked like a long strip of red silk ribbon.

He moved the white-blue flame of the propane torch up and down the water pipe and tried not to look at them as they tied down the doe on the jeep's fender. But when enough time had passed for them to have closed their doors and started their engine and he had heard only silence, he looked up and saw them sharing a drink from a chrome flask, watching him.

He shut off the valve on the propane torch and went back inside, stamping the crust of mud and snow off his boots, the propane bottle hot in his clenched hand. Their jeep ground across Waldo's property and along the frozen edges of the creek, and finally he could not hear it anymore. Then he heard a solitary rifle shot, a sharp, loud crack that meant it was not an echo, that the muzzle had been pointed in the direction of his property.

He opened the front door. It was so quiet outside he could hear a lump of snow fall through the branches of a fir tree. Boomer lay on the creek bank, a pooling

dark red hole in the side of his neck, his mouth opened stiffly against the ice. The wind blew patterns in the fur along the edge of his stomach.

Roger had bought the knife for eight dollars through a mail-order service that advertised in the family magazine in the Sunday newspaper. It was made in Taiwan and copied after the pattern of the Marine Corps K-Bar. It had a ball compass inserted in the end of the tooled grip, saw teeth and a blood groove on the blade, and a honed edge that could cut weightlessly through paper.

He knew that they would stop at the Cabin up on the highway. It was the hunters' place, it was Waldo's place, where they drank busthead boilermakers at the bar, rolled the dice out of a leather cup for the drinks, and slammed the butt of their pool cues down on the floor after each shot. He didn't know why he was so sure they would be there (maybe it was the memory of a convict-student at Deer Lodge who had told Roger, "You see, Doc, right after a score you always go to a bar or a hot-pillow joint. A guy's got to share the feel of it, you know what I mean?"), and so when he came out on the highway and saw their jeep in the parking lot of the bar, the only unexpected moment of recognition was the fact that among all the pickups and cars in the lot, they had parked one vehicle away from Waldo's Power Ram.

He stepped up on the wood porch and opened the door partway. A fire burned in a hearth beyond the pool table and a flat layer of cigarette smoke hung in the purple and orange neon haze over the long, railed bar. The two hunters were eating steaks at a table, their elbows pointed outward as they sliced meat away from the bone.

Roger's hand rested lightly on top of the big knife inside his coat pocket, the blade cold and hard under his fingers. He looked at the two hunters, and in his mind, for just a moment, he saw a series of images like blisters popping across the surface of the brain: his own shape moving quickly across the barroom floor, the backhanded slash of the blade across a cheekbone, across the back of a fat neck, the genuine horror and fear in their eyes. But he felt both foolish and stupid now, and he closed the door and stepped back off the porch into the parking lot. The doe's head hung downward off the jeep's fender onto the front bumper, her eyes like brown glass in the starlight. He lifted on the tension of the nylon rope that bound her to the fender, sawed through it with the survival knife, and hefted her weight up on his shoulders. Her body had already stiffened in the cold, and her hair felt like bristles against his neck.

After he dropped her in the bed of his pickup truck, he walked back to the jeep, cut off the air stems of all four tires, then unscrewed the gas cap and systematically scooped up five handfuls of dirt and poured them into the tank.

As he pulled out onto the highway and skidded slightly on a strip of black ice, he heard an outraged voice behind him and saw in his rearview mirror the silhouettes of men filing quickly out the front door of the bar.

The vault of sky over the valley was bursting with constellations and the moon had risen high above the ponderosas and lighted the snowfields and the skeletal shapes of the cottonwoods along the creek as brightly as a phosphorous flare. He stopped his truck at the chain stretched across the road, unlocked it and let it drop clinking to the road, then drove across it and kept going through his own

property until he reached the wooden gate that gave onto the national forest. From the toolbox in the bed of his truck he took a GI entrenching tool, screwed the adjustable blade into the position of a hoe, lifted the belly of the doe across his shoulders, and with her four legs gathered together across his chest, worked his way up the trail into the darkness of the forest, under the towering gray and pink cliffs that were filmed with ice in the moonlight.

He hadn't gone far when he heard the surge of a truck engine up his private road. He looked back down the trail and saw Waldo's Power Ram, with three men in the cab, stop in his yard, and behind them the headlights of cars and other pickups. He set the doe down in a tangle of huckleberry bushes and began chopping through the snow and frozen dirt with the shovel. There was no time to build a fire to thaw the ground, and with his bare hands he ripped away slabs of ice and frozen root systems that were meshed as hard as cable in the earth, felt his skin tear, a fingernail fold back on itself; then on his knees he chopped even harder into the dirt until he was down past the freeze line and the blade of the shovel bit into the moist subsoil.

He hollowed out the hole deeper, flinging humus and dirt out to the sides, then pushed the doe into it and pressed the stiffness of her flat against the contours of the earth. As he scraped the snow and leaves back over her stomach and flanks, he saw blood on the wooden shaft of the entrenching tool, and in the heart-stopping urgency of the moment he did not know if it was the doe's or his own.

The wind blew down the canyon, and the ice crystals in the larch and ponderosa pine and fir trees glittered as though in a fantasy and rang as loudly as crystal. His face was white and shining with sweat in the moon's glow.

In Roger's front yard, Waldo and the hunters moved in a circle, massing their energies, their voices melding together with the sound of their truck and car engines, their shadows on the snow like simian figures moving about on a prehistoric savannah.

"We're here," one of the hunters yelled to the others. "We're here."

