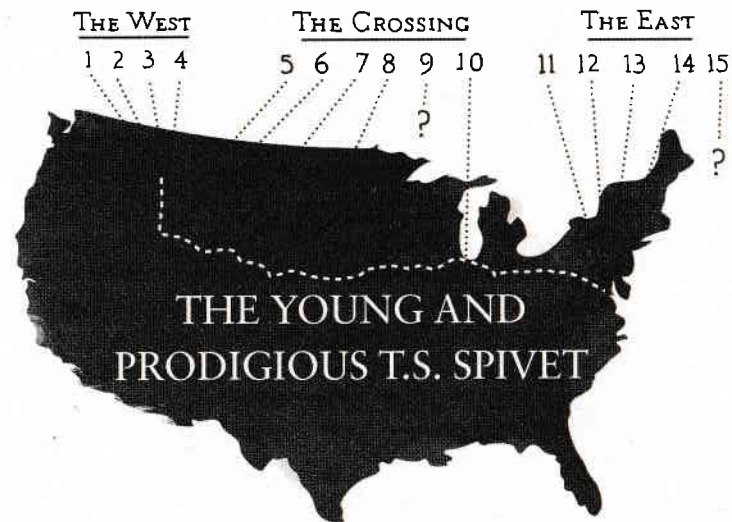


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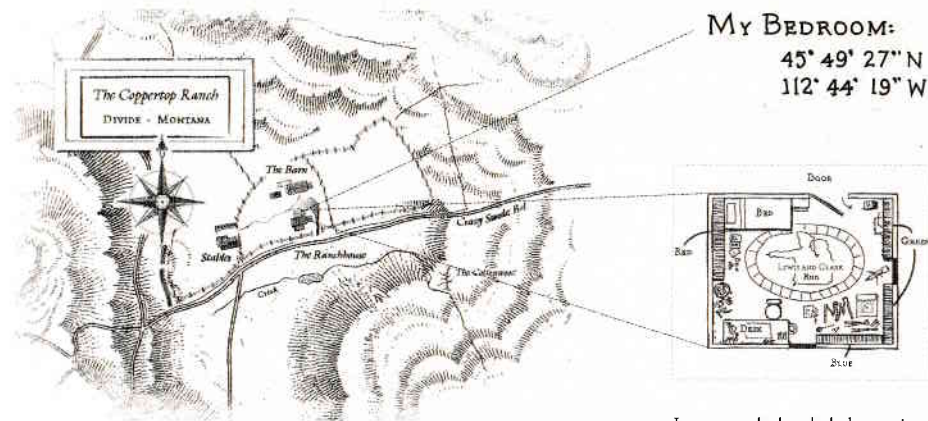
Continental
Divide

PART 1: THE WEST

TSS

Montana as Rivers





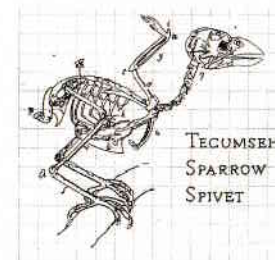
CHAPTER 1

The phone call came late one August afternoon as my older sister Gracie and I sat out on the back porch shucking the sweet corn into the big tin buckets. The buckets were still peppered with little teeth-marks from this past spring, when Verywell, our ranch hound, became depressed and turned to eating metal.

Perhaps I should clarify. When I say that Gracie and I were shucking the sweet corn, what I actually mean is that Gracie was shucking the corn and I was drawing a diagrammatic map in one of my little blue spiral notebooks of precisely *how* she was shucking the corn.

All of my notebooks were color-coded. The *blue* notebooks that neatly lined the south wall of my room were reserved for “Maps of People Doing Things,” as opposed to the *green* notebooks on the east wall, which contained zoological, geological, and topographical maps, or the *red* notebooks on the west wall, which was where I mapped out insect anatomy

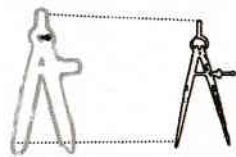
I constantly battled the curious weight of entropy in my tiny bedroom, which was stuffed to the gills with the sediment of a cartographer’s life: surveying equipment, antique telescopes, sextants, long rolls of goose-twine, jars of rabbit wax, compasses, withered, malodorous weather balloons, a sparrow skeleton perched on my drafting table. (At the moment of my birth, the sparrow had fatally crashed into the kitchen window. A stiff-legged ornithologist from Billings reconstructed the shattered skeleton, and I was given a new middle name.)



The
Sparrow Skeleton
from Notebook G214

And I think she was right.

Every instrument in my room hung on a hook, and on the wall behind each piece I had drawn and labeled the outline of the apparatus, like an echo of the real thing, so I always knew when something was missing and where it must be returned to.



a.

A.

Still, even with such a system in place, things fell and things broke; piles formed and my methods of orientation always seemed to unravel. I was only twelve, but through the slow, inevitable burn of a thousand sunrises and sunsets, a thousand maps traced and re-traced, I had already absorbed the valuable precept that everything crumbled into itself eventually, and to cultivate a crankiness about this was just a waste of time.

My room was no exception. It was not uncommon for me to wake up in the middle of the night with my bed full of mapping mechanisms, as if the nocturnal spirits were trying to chart my dreams.



in case my mother, Dr. Clair Linneaker Spivet, ever called upon my services.

I had once tried lining maps on the north wall of my room, but in my excitement to organize, I briefly forgot that this was where the entrance to my room was located, and when Dr. Clair opened the door to announce that dinner was ready, the bookshelf fell on my head.

I sat on my Lewis and Clark carpet, covered in notebooks and shelving. "Am I dead?" I asked, knowing that she would not tell me, even if I was.

"Never let your work trap you into a corner," Dr. Clair said through the door.

Our ranch house was located just north of Divide, Montana, a tiny town you could miss from the highway if you happened to adjust your radio at the wrong moment. Surrounded by the Pioneer Mountains, Divide was nestled in a flat-backed valley sprinkled with sagebrush and half-burnt two-by-fours, a reminder of when people actually used to live here. The railroad came in from the north, the Big Hole River came in from the west, and both left heading south, searching for brighter pastures. Each had its own way of moving through the land, and each had its own odor of passage: the railway tracks cut straight ahead, asking no questions of the bedrock through which it sliced, the wrought-iron rails smelling of axle grease and the wooden slats of rancid, licorice-scented shellac. In contrast, the Big Hole River talked with the land as it wound its way through the valley, collecting creeks as it went, quietly taking the path of least resistance. The Big Hole smelled of moss and mud and sage and occasionally huckleberries—if it was the right time of year, though it had not been the right time of year for many years now.

These days the railway did not stop in Divide, and only Union Pacific freight came rumbling through

the valley at 6.44 A.M., 11.53 A.M., and 5.15 P.M., give or take a couple minutes, depending on the weather conditions. The boom era of Montana mining towns was long gone; there was no reason for the trains to stop anymore.

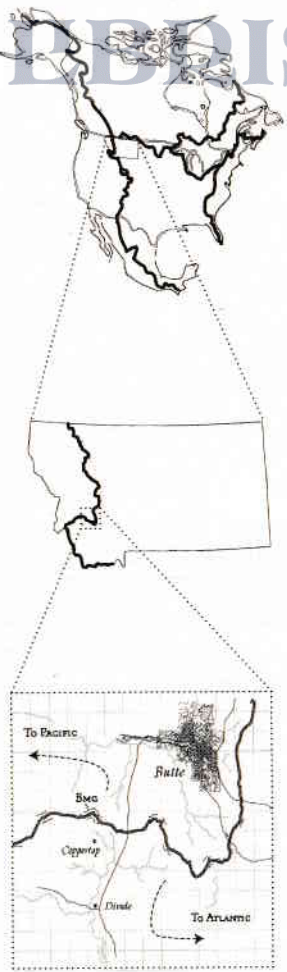
Divide once had a saloon.

"The Blue Moon Saloon," my brother Layton and I used to say while we floated in the creek, our noses pointed pompously upward, as if only gentry frequented the establishment, though in retrospect the opposite was more probable: these days, Divide was a town of holdout ranchers, fanatical fishermen, and the occasional Unabomber, not dandy fops with a mind for parlor games.

Layton and I had never been to the Blue Moon, but the idea of what and who might be inside became the basis of many of our fantasies as we floated on our backs. Soon after Layton died, the Blue Moon burned down, but by then, even up in flames, the place was no longer a vesicle of the imagination; it had become just another building burning, and now burnt, in the valley.

If you stood where the old railroad platform used to be, next to the white rusted sign that, when you squinted your eyes in just the right way, still read **DIVIDE**—from this spot, if you pointed yourself due north, using compass, sun, stars, or intuition, and then walked 4.73 miles, whacking your way through the scrub brush above the river basin and then up into the Douglas fir-covered hills, you would collide with the front gate of our little ranch, the Coppertop, nestled on an isolated plateau at 5,343 feet, a stone's throw south of the continental divide, from which the town had gleaned its name.

The divide, oh, the divide: I had grown up with this great border at my back, and its quiet, unerring existence had penetrated deep into my bones and brain. The divide was a massive, sprawling boundary



Continental Divide
as Fractal
from Notebook B58

not determined by politics, religion, or war but by tectonics, granite, and gravity. How remarkable that no U.S. president had signed this border into law, and yet its delineation had affected the expansion and formation of America's frontier in a million untold ways. This jagged sentinel sliced the nation's watersheds into east and west, the Atlantic and the Pacific—and out west, water was gold, and where the water went, people followed. The raindrops blown a couple of miles west of our ranch would land in creeks that percolated through the Columbia River system into the Pacific, whereas the water in Feely Creek, our creek, was blessed with the task of traveling two thousand miles more, all the way down to the bayous of Louisiana before spilling through the loamy delta into the Gulf of Mexico.

Layton and I used to climb Bald Man's Gap, the exact apex of the divide—he taking care not to spill the glass of water clutched in between his hands, while I minded a rudimentary pinhole camera that I had fashioned from a shoe box. I would take pictures of him pouring water on either side of the hill, running back and forth, yelling “Hello Portland!” alternately with “Hello N’Awlins!” in his best Creole accent. As much as I worked the dials on the side of the box, the pictures never quite captured the heroism of Layton in that moment.

Layton once said at the dinner table after one of our expeditions, “We can learn a lot from a river, can't we, Dad?” And though Father didn't say anything at the time, you could see in the way he ate the rest of his mash that he appreciated that kind of thinking in his son. Father loved Layton as much as anything in this life.

Out on the porch, Gracie shucked and I mapped. The tickers and clickers splattered the fields of our

ranch with their droning orchestration, and August swam all around us—hot, thick, and remarkable. Montana glowed in the summertime. Just last week, I had watched the slow, quiet spill of daybreak over the soft, fir-topped spine of the Pioneers. I had stayed up all night drafting a flip book that superimposed an ancient map of the body from the Chin Dynasty on a triptych of the Navajo, Shoshone, and Cheyenne understandings of a person's inner workings.

At the nip of daybreak, I walked out onto the back porch barefoot and delirious. Even in my sleepless state, I sensed the private magic of the moment, and so I gripped my pinky behind my back until the sun finally cleared the Pioneers and flashed its unknowable face at me.

I sat down on the steps of the porch, bewildered, and those crafty wooden boards took this opportunity to engage me in conversation:

It's just you and me, buster—let's sing a quiet song together, the porch said.

I have work to do, I said.

What work?

I don't know...ranch work.

You are not a ranch boy.

I'm not?

You do not whistle cowpuncher tunes or spit into tin cans.

I'm not good at spitting, I said. I make maps.

Maps? the porch asked. What is there to map? Spit into tin cans. Ride the high country. Take her easy.

There is plenty to map. I do not have time to take her easy. I do not even know what that really means.

You are not a ranch boy. You are a fool.

I am not a fool, I said. And then: Am I a fool?

You are lonely, the porch said.

I am?

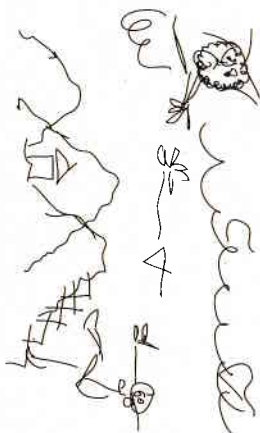
Where is he?

I don't know.
You know.
Yes. books

Then take a seat, and whistle a lonely cowpuncher tune.

I am not finished with my maps. There is more to map.

► The first map I ever drew was from this back porch.



Hello, God By T. S. Spiver, age 6

At the time, I thought these were useful instructions on how to walk up cranky old Mt. Humbug to heaven and shake hands with God. In retrospect, the map's crudeness was not only due to the shaky hands of youth but also because I did not understand that the map of a place was different from the place itself. At age six, a boy could enter the world of a map just as easily as the genuine article.

While Gracie and I were shucking, Dr. Clair came out on the back porch. Gracie and I both looked up as we heard the old porch creak under Dr. Clair's footsteps. Squeezed tightly between thumb and forefinger she held a pin, on the end of which gleamed a bright blue-green metallic beetle that I recognized as a *Cicindela purpurea lauta*, a rare subspecies of the Cow Path Tiger Beetle from Oregon.

My mother was a tall, bony woman whose skin was so pasty that people often stared as we passed them on the street in Butte. I once heard an older woman in a flowered sunhat remark, "Such fragile wrists!" to her traveling partner. And it was true: if she weren't my mother, I would have thought there was something wrong with her.

Dr. Clair pulled her dark hair back into a bun using two polished sticks that looked like bones. She took her hair down only at night, and even then only behind closed doors. When we were younger, Gracie and I used to take turns peeking through the keyhole at the hidden scene of grooming on the other side. The keyhole was too small for us to see the whole picture: you could only make out her elbow moving back and forth, back and forth, as if she were working some old loom; or if you moved your body just slightly, you might be lucky enough to see some of the hair itself, the comb returning again and again, making that quiet thrushing sound. The keyhole, the

peeking, the thrushing: it all seemed so deliciously naughty at the time.

Layton, like Father, wasn't interested in anything that had to do with beauty or hygiene and thus never joined us. He belonged with Father in the fields, punching cows and breaking broncs.

Dr. Clair wore lots of green jewelry that jingled—peridot earrings, little sapphire twinkle bracelets. Even the chain that kept her spectacles around her neck was made of green malachite stones she had found on a field expedition to India. Sometimes, with the sticks in her hair and all the quiet emerald ornamentation, I thought she looked like a spring-time birch tree ready to burst into blossom.

For a moment, she just stood there, surveying Gracie with the big tin bucket of yellow ears between her legs and me on the stairs with my notebook and my magnifying-glass headpiece. We looked back at her.

And then she said, "Phone for you, T.S."

"Phone? For him?" Gracie said, shocked.

"Yes, Gracie, the phone's for T.S.," Dr. Clair said, not without some satisfaction.

"Who's calling?" I asked.

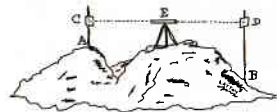
"I'm not sure who it is. I didn't ask," my mother said, still twirling her tiger beetle in the light. Dr. Clair was the kind of mother who would teach you the periodic table while feeding you porridge as an infant but not the type, in this age of global terrorism and child kidnappers, to ask who might be calling her children on the telephone.

My curiosity about the phone call was complicated by the fact that I was in the middle of drawing my map, and an unfinished map always left a little tickle in the back of my throat.

On my map, "Gracie Shucking the Sweet Corn

To tell you the truth, like Gracie, I was also a bit mystified by the phone call, because I really had only two friends:

1) *Charlie*. Charlie was a tow-headed boy in the grade below me who was eager to help out with any of my mapping expeditions that took him up into the mountains and beyond his family's trailer in South Butte, where his mother sat in a lawn chair all day long running a garden hose over her enormous feet. It was almost as if Charlie were half-mountain goat, because he seemed most at home when standing on inclines of forty-five degrees or more, holding his bright orange surveying pole as I spotted him from across the valley.



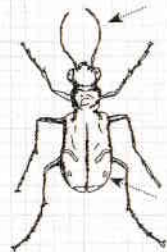
2) *Dr. Terrence Yorn*. Dr. Yorn was an entomology professor at Montana State in Bozeman and my mentor. Dr. Clair had originally introduced us at the Southwestern Montana Beetle picnic. The picnic had been dreadfully boring before I met Dr. Yorn. Our plates full of potato salad, we talked about longitude for three hours straight. Dr. Yorn was the one who had encouraged me (admittedly behind my mother's back) to submit my work to *Science* and *Smithsonian*. In some ways, I guess you could call him my "scientific father."

Jimmy, the Transit.
Dr. Yorn gave me
this transit after my
first publication in
Smithsonian.

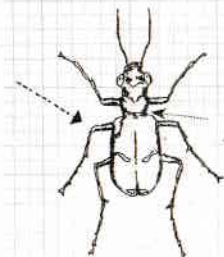


JIMNEY

#6," I had put a little numeral 1 next to where she first gripped the husk at the top. Then she yanked downward three times: *rip, rip, rip*, and this motion I had denoted by three arrows, although one arrow was smaller than the others, because that first rip was always a little bit belabored—one must overcome the initial inertia of the corn husk. I do love the sound of ripping corn husks. The violence of the noise, the sustained popping and shoring of the silky organic threads, made me think of someone tearing up an expensive and potentially Italian set of trousers in a fit of madness that this person might just regret later. At least that's how Gracie shucked the husks, or husked the shucks as I sometimes called it—a bit mischievously, I might add, because for some reason it upset my mother when I bent words in this way. You couldn't blame her, really—she was a beetle scientist, and she had spent nearly all her adult life studying very small creatures under a magnifying glass and then precisely classifying them into families and subfamilies, species and subspecies, according to their physical and evolutionary features. We even had a lithograph of Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish inventor of the modern taxonomic classification system, hanging above the fireplace, much to Father's silent and ongoing protestations. So in a way, it made sense that Dr. Clair would get annoyed at me when I said "grasspopper" instead of "grasshopper" or "ex-parrot puss" instead of "asparagus," because her job was to pay very close attention to the smallest details that the human eye could not possibly see and then ensure that the presence of a hair on the tip of the mandible or little white rear maculations on the elytra meant that the beetle was a *C. purpurea purpurea* and not a *C. purpurea lauta*. Personally, I thought my mother should be less concerned about my inventive wordplay, which was a kind of mental aerobics that all healthy twelve-year-old boys engaged in, and pay



C. purpurea purpurea



C. purpurea lauta

Identification of Cow Path
Tiger Beetle Subspecies
from Notebook R23

I have not shown these drawings to Dr. Clair yet. She did not ask for them and I feared she would get angry at me for stepping into her field of expertise again.

more attention to the mild insanity that took hold of Gracie when she husked the shucks, because this really ran against her general character as a bona fide adult trapped in the body of a sixteen-year-old, and to me pointed to some unaddressed wellspring of anger. I suppose I could safely say that even though Gracie was only four years my elder, she was many years beyond me in terms of maturity, common sense, knowledge of social custom, and understanding of the dramatic posture. Perhaps the unhinged look she cultivated on her face while shucking the corn was nothing more than that: a cultivation, just another cue that Gracie was a misunderstood actress sharpening her *forté* during one of the many mundane chores on a Montana ranch. Perhaps—but I was more partial to the idea that beneath her pristine exterior, she was actually just unhinged.

Oh, Gracie. Dr. Clair said she was absolutely dazzling as the lead in her high school's production of *Pirates of Penzance*, although I could not attend, because I was finishing a behavior map for *Science* magazine on how the female Australian dung beetle *Onthophagus sagittarius* used its horns during copulation. I didn't tell Dr. Clair about this project. I merely complained of a stomachache and then got Verywell to eat some sage and throw up all over the porch, and then pretended it was mine—pretended I had eaten the sage and the mouse bones and the dog food. Gracie was probably miraculous as the pirate's wife. She was a miraculous woman in general, and probably the most together member of our family, for when you got right down to it, Dr. Clair was a misguided coleopterist, who for twenty years had been chasing a phantom species of beetle—the tiger monk, *Cicindela nosferatie*—that even she was not sure truly existed; and my father, Tecumseh Elijah Spivet, was a quiet and brooding bronc-buster who would walk into a room and say something like, "You

can't bullshit a cricket," and then just leave, the type of man who was born perhaps one hundred years too late.

"He's probably tired of waiting, T.S. You'd better go get the phone," Dr. Clair was saying. Clearly she had discovered something interesting in the *C. purpurea lauta* on the end of her pin because her eyebrows went up and then down and then up again and then she turned on her heel and disappeared back into the house.

"I'm going to finish the shucking," Gracie said.

"Don't you dare," I said.

"I'm going to," she said firmly.

"If you do," I said, "I won't help you with your Halloween costume this year."

Gracie paused at this, weighing its seriousness, and then said again: "I'm going to." She held up the ear of corn threateningly.

I carefully took off my magnification headpiece, closed my notebook, and laid my drafting pen on top at a diagonal so as to convey to Gracie that I would be coming back soon—that this business of mapping the corn was not finished.

As I walked past the entrance to Dr. Clair's study, I saw her struggling with the weight of some huge taxonomic dictionary, using only one hand to hold the giant tome, as the other was still maintaining the pinned tiger beetle upright in the air. This was the kind of image I would remember my mother by when and if she ever passed on: balancing the delicate specimen against the weight of the system within which it belonged.

To get to the kitchen where the phone lay waiting, I could take an infinite number of routes, each with its own pros and cons: *The Hallways/Pantry Route* was most direct but also the most boring; *The Upstairs/*

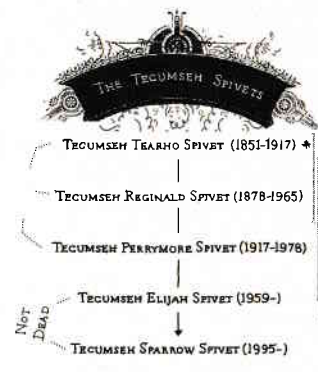
Downstairs Route gave me the most exercise, but the necessary shift in altitude also made me feel a little woozy. In the heat of the moment, I decided on a route I did not often use, particularly when Father was lurking around the house. I cautiously cracked open the plain pinewood door and then made my way through the leathered darkness of the Sett'ng Room.

The Sett'ng Room was the only room in the house that was distinctly Father's. He claimed it with a silent fierceness that you did not test. My father rarely spoke above a mumble, but once when Gracie kept insisting at dinner that we should make the Sett'ng Room more of a normal living room where "normal" people felt compelled to relax and have "normal" conversations, he slowly steamed over his mash until we heard a sort of muted pop-and-tinkle kind of sound and we all looked over and saw that he had splintered his whiskey glass in the palm of his hand. Layton loved that. I remember him loving that.

"That's the last place I got to set in this house and throw my boots up," my father had said, his palm slowly bleeding rivers into the potatoes. And that was that.

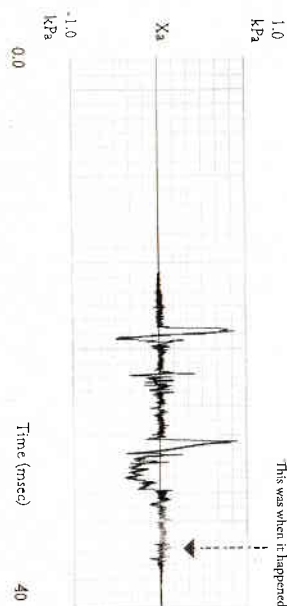
The Sett'ng Room was a museum of sorts. Just before my great-grandfather, Tecumseh Reginald Spivet (see *Tecumseh sidebar*), died, he gave my father a hunk of peppery Anaconda copper for his sixth birthday. He had smuggled the ore out of the mines during the turn of the century, back when Butte was a booming copper outfit and the biggest city between Minneapolis and Seattle. The piece of copper put some sort of spell on my father, for thereafter he developed the habit of slowly collecting trinkets and props from the vast stage of the open range.

On the northern wall of the Sett'ng Room, next to a large crucifix that Father touched every morning, there was a shrine to Billy the Kid, lit somewhat awk-



* Reginald's father (and my great-great-grandfather) was actually born just outside Helsinki as Terho Sievä, which in Finnish roughly translates to "Mr. Handsome Acorn." So perhaps it was a relief for him when the immigration authority at Ellis Island flubbed his name as Tearho Spivet and a new family name was created with the false flick of a pen. On his way out west to work in the Butte mines, Tearho happened to stop off in a ramshackle Ohio saloon long enough to hear a drunk man who claimed to be half Navajo deliver a much embellished story about the great Shawnee warrior Tecumseh. It was at the part in the story when Tecumseh made a final stand against the White Man at the Battle of the Thames that my great-great-grandfather began quietly weeping, even though he was supposed to be one of those hardened Finns. In the battle, after Tecumseh was felled by a double ball shot through the chest, General Proctor's men scalped and mutilated his body beyond recognition and then threw him into a mass grave. Tearho walked out of that saloon with a new name in a new land.

At least that's how the story went—you never know with these ancestral tales.



Gunshot #21
from Notebook B345

After that, I hid his name in the topography of every one of my maps.