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The Words of the Preacher

By
Robert Cantrell

The Very Reverend Toppel C. Bammert knew that today was going to be trying, at least. He knew it before he even opened his eyes fully. Images of heat, images of bugs crawling through the long dry prairie grasses, images of distorted faces, today they would bury Henry Cato Wright.

The funeral was to be at noon. Nothing in the church, for since Henry Cato, in life had never set foot in the building, it seemed a bit of a sham to be dragging his expended carcass there now. It was only through the tenuous connection with Henry's mother, Old Miz Aggie Wright, that there would be "words" spoken over the grave at all. Not that Henry lacked mourners, just that those who would mourn his passing would be more likely to do so following Henry's own often stated preference.; by passing around a quart of Jim Beam Bourbon Whiskey, diluting their tears to taste with the hundred proof.

In the dry caliche range land of the Texas Panhandle, the institutional church had never formed very fertile soil to receive its seed, for the worship of God here is the worship of the land, and the great bowl of the sky, found in such a full presentation over only a few places on the planet, dwarfing any attempt at impressive edifice attempted by even the Southern Baptist Church. It was tough enough for the Reverend Bammert without Henry Cato Wright and his crew.

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The Double W Ranch had been homesteaded by Henry Cato's great grandfather, Walter Alonzo Wright in the 1880's. There were no towns nearby, Amarillo and Lubbock were not yet even railroad junctions then. It would be the oil that would eventually bring people, but back then the oil still slept. In those days, New Mobeetie, consisting of a post office, general store, and saloon, was about all that passed for metropolitan affairs for over 200 miles around.

Alonzo had fought irregularly with the Texas Rangers to clear the last of the dangerous Comanche from the plains around the Canadian River, and then had found the time to establish, build, and run the ranch, eventually over forty sections, twenty-five thousand acres, every acre accounted for by the hoofprint of a horse with Alonzo or one of his sons in the saddle, and watered as much by the sweat of those men as by any rain from heaven above.

The ranch prospered in the boom beef market of World War One, and even taking time out to "personally attend to fixin' the Fureher's hash" in World War Two, Alonzo's eldest grandson, Richmond Wright, had continued until the day he died upgrading the stock and digging the wells and the casing to keep them alive.

When in turn, his son, our Henry Cato was a boy, and even as a young man, he could still count on being up at first light to begin the work of the day. Then there was indeed work that needed to be done from "cain't see early to cain't see dark." But after old Richmond died, and the interstates had webbed Texas, and most of the young men, and women, began to go away to Texas A&M, or to Tech over in Lubbock to learn the science of ranch management.

It just seemed that there was less and less that needed to be done by people. Mostly, nowadays, things were done by some sort of machine or other, from digging post-holes with a tractor and power take-off, to rounding up cattle by pickup, or even from the air.

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Henry Cato, who had become head of the family, had not gone to Ag College, but rather had marched in head-up through the gates of the New Mexico Military Institute over at Roswell during the height of the Korean War. He did reasonably well there, being in perfect tune with the spirit of such an institution. "If you get through there", he used to say with proudly clenched jaw, "Nobody will ever be able to degrade you again." His cadet tenure ended almost coincidental with the Armistice in Korea, and by the time Viet Nam came along he was too old and too settled with family and dealing with the ranch to have any part in it.

"I just got born off footed is all. Just slipped between all the interesting stuff." He would aver yet again over drinks at Tranquey's.

He had married Martha Caldwell, who's family was from down around Waco, as was Miz Aggie, who knew her family. Martha fit in well as she had grown up on a ranch. They soon had the two boys to raise as well as the stock. Martha was what people there called a "handsome woman", and she was calm enough to balance Cato's growing inner tension.

He was not a big man, but he was a regular iron foundry for energy and plain old tough. Someone once described him as looking like "Teddy Roosevelt, with the fat all sucked off." He often showed his big square teeth much the same as the original T.R. did with his famous smile, but with Henry Cato, it was as likely a grimace of spiritual torment.

America in the late twentieth century seemed bizarre to Henry Cato Wright.

"It all started to go to shit when the goddamn yankees started shovin' that abomination in Washington down everybody's throat," meaning, to Henry Cato, a whole panoply of greivences with things generally, dressed up, for this town Founder's Day in semi-quasi-Confederate uniform. Mainly consisting of a big hat with plume and the unfortunate choice for

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an inveterate heavy drinker, a real-live razor-sharp sword of about three feet in length with a foundry mark saying, "Richmond VA 1862". Martha had calmly suggested that he might offend people.

"Offend people? Who the hell am I offending with this truth? Perhaps fifty bystanders watched to see what would transpire as Martha stood next to his horse, holding his stirrup, attempting to keep him from blowing a cork completely.

"Henry, you're going to offend the coloreds. Caldonia and her family are right over there, now. Be nice." Caldonia Simmons was a big black woman who came in twice a week to the ranch house to help Martha with the heavy cleaning, and who had "been with" the Wrights for years.

"Coloreds?" You think any of that was about race. Hell they got you fooled, too? War Between the States didn't have to do with race, that was all just in the way. The war was all about just who is in charge...around here..." He was a good horseman and it was requiring all of his expertise to keep from toppling from the saddle. The horse was skittish. He kicked it once, savagely, not to rile it up, but to clearly establish his mastery over the animal. He yanked back on the reins with just the right touch and the horse snapped up still except its hooves doing a nervous mark time on the asphalt of the parking lot.

Those gutless brainless wonders have done just Goddamn fine! Look around here. Just look! Who the hell runs things?"

"Now Cato..." Martha said softly.

"Giv'em hell, Cato!" came a voice from the square, not a touch of irony or humor in it.

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"Yeah, give them snotnosed Washington yankee motherfucks a taste uh that cold steel!" Martha glanced about nervously to make sure that there were no strangers, just the townsfolk who all knew each other, and whom she knew Cato wouldn't have to confront. It was pretty clear that the crowd that had gathered out of curiosity was all pretty much on Wright's side in any case. The Simmons family had quietly disappeared, much to Martha's relief. Not that she worried for an instant about Cato harming them, or even allowing anyone else to do so for that matter, but she found herself standing beside a bundle of angry energy in the horse and rider, and the energy was spreading almost visibly out across the people.

Suddenly Bill "Hardpan" Hawkins was beside her, handing Cato up another bottle of Beam. One would have thought that this would worry her even more, but the glance she exchanged with Hawkins was an old one. They knew from experience that the only way to control Cato now was to take him all the way to the end of consciousness, for he would not be backed down his path by anyone, man or devil. She knew that when he got about half-way through the second bottle he would pass out, and all she could do now was make sure that he was on soft ground when he fell out of the saddle.

"I mean," he went on, "maybe folks from Austin might know what goes on out here but how the hell is any yankee cocksucker gonna know a piddly squat about ranchin?"

"You tell it Cato!" The crowd reflected back to him the wave of summer heat. Martha had begun to lead his mount by the bridle over to the edge of the square, seemingly to give him more room. This went on another five minutes and then all of a sudden Hawkins stepped up again and said quietly, "Watch out, Ma'am." Almost immediately Wright straightened strangely in the saddle and then slumped. Hawkins knew it would be to the left, even in a stuporous

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state, and gently caught him as he slipped down, gracefully manhandling his limp form over to a bench nearby and into what passed for sitting position.

Gradually the crowd dispersed and the year's festivities were over again.

Henry Cato watched the evening news, and drank Beam, and got ulcers, and sucked the pain in through clenched teeth. He could generally find enough to stay busy around the ranch, but he had to think harder and harder about it, until finally the difficulty identifying and justifying the work was usually harder than the work itself.

Then with the modern ideas of management and liberal government came the big subsidies. Soon it was clear to some that it paid more, in a purely monetary sense, to sit on one's behind in the cool, letting the land go fallow. Only gradually did it become clear, mostly to a few of the older style landowners, such as Henry Cato, that such profits were tied to losses that were ultimately more terrible, and, ultimately inevitable. Even such as Wright had to bow before the creeping liberal logic and its tangled morass of regulation and loss of independence and acknowledge themselves "nothing more than another bunch of welfare queens."

Martha heard him grinding his teeth at night as he fought, in his dreams, the world that was too cowardly to come out and take him on in the broad light of day. It became a sort of dark joke to Cato and his peers that they were "working so hard" when they would sit in the back of Tranquey's Bar on the hot afternoons and buy each other rounds, usually a lot of rounds, with just the odd change of a Land Bank payment. Over the years there had been many such days, and many such nights.

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But Henry Cato had been raised to believe in work and he had been raised to believe in command, authority. At the same time however, as befit his self-sufficient lineage, he could never have been a mere functionary in a network of police or even of formal law enforcement.

He spent more and more of his time at a small office in town near the courthouse from which he ran a bail-bond service. He didn't need the money, he needed the activity. Bonding the bad guys kept his hand in the affairs of the town, and since it was usually only the real troublemakers who would dare to break their bond with him, it gave him what he considered worthy quarry to track down and bring in. He usually knew what the bad men would do, because he knew what he would do, and so he had an impressive record of returning these offenders to the hands of formal law-enforcement. The local sheriff was only too glad to let him do it, too. Though his bond jumping clients were usually only edge-of-town, semi-urbanized common bar-stool white-trash, from time-to-time Cato would have to track someone out through the plains for at least a ways on horseback. He had been raised outdoors and he was a good tracker because he understood the weather and the land.

The Reverend Bammert had never had much connection with the land himself, having been born and raised in St. Louis and having only come "out" to the Texas Panhandle as his job with the church had dictated. That had been fifteen year ago, and he had long ago stopped waiting for the phone to ring from Dallas, or Houston, or maybe Wichita Falls or finally, even from Pampa.

He had resigned himself to his preaching, from which he got a certain amount of self-satisfaction, to the church choir, and to the local Boy Scout Troop. He usually kept himself busy during the week with visitation at the homes of the ick and the tired Baptists, and he was

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perfectly happy to spend every Wednesday afternoon in the air-conditioned cool of the Royal Vista banquet room down at the Ramada Inn, eating chicken and peas with the Lion's Club. He had never in his life sat on a horse, and he especially didn't like the way the wind on the Plains blew sand around. Some days the sand was so bad he could hear it crunching between his dentures as he ate his chicken, just from having walked the 30 yards from his car to the door of the Ramada.

Today he looked out the window of that car as he drove to the Double W, following the map he had drawn in pencil as Miz Aggie had explained to him over the phone where exactly Henry Cato would be buried. Miz Aggie was in her eighties and tough as she was, her mental clutch slipped a bit and she was off and on in institutions. Her directions had made the Reverend Bammert more than a little concerned that she might be thinking that they might all be somewhere in some other state.

Bammert's car, or at least the one that the First Baptist Church maintained for him, was very much in place there even on the hardpan cliché' roads. Most families who owned the ranches, along with whatever assortment of work vehicles and pick-up trucks they maintained in their motor pool, usually had one large, new car, mostly of the Chrysler or Buick or Cadillac ilk that was the "family car." This one would be used to "go to town" or to Lubbock for a cousin's wedding or to pick up someone from the airport in Amarillo, or to show visitors around the ranch if they were from the city and unused to grit-in-the-teeth West Texas.

Bammert's carriage was a large black Buick, four-door, of course, and if Bammert's own presence was thrown into the general ambiance that it created, it could best be described as a hearse for the living.

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As he drove with one hand, and looked at the map out of the corner of his eye, he pulled down the sun visor to try to cut out the glare of the sun in the more or less cloudless sky. He had long ago given up trying to wear a hat of any kind. The small brimmed city hats that he had been used to seeing his father wear were forever being swept from his head by blustery schoolyard bully wind, and rolled off across the flat land. He realized that he looked very much like a plump prairie hen when he scurried along chasing it, so he had just given it up as a bad bargain. He could never fathom how the working cowboys could keep a broadbrimmed Stetson in place, and it was just as well that he hadn't, because he would have looked foolish trying to wear one. None of this would have been that bad except that his thatch on top was markedly paltry and so days out in the sun, like the one he was about to endure, usually left him tender on top for some time afterward.

In the distance he could see a windmill. Just about the only visible landmarks that stood up more than the height of a man on horseback for miles around were the windmills. Each section, or square mile, of the land had its own windmill, most of them put there by the Wrights over the last three generations. Bammert wasn't exactly sure if he had the right side-road, but trusting in the Lord to not leave him stranded out in the middle of nowhere, he turned off and followed the small track. The yellow, sun-burned grass between the tire ruts stood tall enough to tickle the transaxle of the Buick so it sounded like he was sliding in sled rather than motoring on great rubber wheels.

He drove on, passing plowed fields where "a little dab" of small grain was going to be grown to feed up the cows. Henry Cato would sometimes come out to one of these fields to plow, drunk or sober, usually when he was drunk. He would come out and push Hardpan

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Hawkins or Crowder Bob off the machine, assuming command of the closed cab with its air-conditioning and its computer and radio systems, he would drive rows a straight as an arrow, pulling off of a bottle of Beam at the turns. He would sometimes complete an entire field in this ways, but it rarely took more than a morning or an afternoon, unless he drove especially low, or got out and fooled unnecessarily with the plow couplings. While he would do this, Crowder Bob would lay on the hot plastic seat of his own barely bailed together 1976 Gremlin and snore loudly enough to compete with the tractor.

"Crowder" Bob Mason was so named because with his nearly four-hundred pound girth, he was used to "crowd" the cattle into handling pens when there was any vet work, or branding, or such, to be done.

Today Bammert saw that the big Massey -Ferguson tractor stood silent and abandoned. He noted next to it a smaller tractor, fitted with a backhoe, also standing quietly, the tenacious, ghostly gray soil sticking to the teeth of the scoop. It dawned on him that it had probably been used to open Henry Cato's grave. For a moment he was taken aback, as he had somehow pictured that work being done by men with shovels in their hands, standing up to their armpits in the hole, pitching shovelful after shovelful out onto a growing mound beside the small room itself. Tipple Bammert had also never tried to dig anything deeper than a pansy bed in that part of the country.

He came to a gate and twenty or so cows, gathered loosely by the windmill eyed him uncertainly. He nosed the big Buick up to the corrugated slats that formed the metal gate and looked around. There was no one in sight. He put the car in idle, opened the door, and as the difference in temperature drove him to gasp and sigh with his eyes closed, promptly stepped

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out into a large mound of fresh cow shit. He had done that at least once before, and it grieved him especially because fresh cow crap on wingtip shoes meant hours sitting at his desk in the back room of the church with a toothpick, digging out each tiny pocket, one at a time. He shook his head because there was nothing he could do about it now. Besides, as far as he was concerned, Mr. Henry Cato Wright deserved no better than to be preached over by a man with cowshit on his shoes. They would just have to accept it.

He opened the gate and at first just thought he could swing it wide and get back into the Buick in time to get through before it swung closed again, as it was designed to do. Quickly however, he found out "how straight the gate" and it swung to with a swift taut clang almost as soon as he let it go. He girded up again and walked the gate back to the fence, securing it with the rusted bailing wire he found looped there. By now he was sweating through the white shirt he wore under his shiny preacher-black suit. He quickly got back in the car and through the gate. Then once again he opened the car door, regretting all over again the loss of the air conditioning, got out, and closed the gate again. But just as he was in the process of loping the wire back over the gate post to secure it, he looked up and saw, coming down the road with a great rooster-tail of dust, the "family car" of the Wrights. Miz Aggie, perhaps his only ally this day, was nestled in the back seat, a tiny black hat on her gray hair and fine black net lace hanging down across her face.

Bammert hurriedly undid the gate, sticking himself in the thumb on the rusty wire. Before he could complete his thought about lockjaw however, the big car, its windows down, turned in, enveloping him in a cloud of caliche' dust, and slowed to approach the gate.

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He nodded to the driver, Henry's brother Pete, now the paterfamilias. There was a scant nod back. The preacher swung the gate back for them, gratefully noting that that would put him on the side of the car where Aggie was, so that he might have a sustaining word with her perhaps, while the others idled the car for a moment. Instead however, the vehicle slid on past, and before he could more than start to gently greet old Mrs. Wright with his practiced funeral manner, she said, distinctly, but without turning her head, "Get that gate closed you stupid Mexican! If any of my cows get loose I'll horsewhip you, you hear?" His only supposed support, his ally, the only person who even sometimes spoke his language, was someplace else, perhaps in a different dimension, certainly in a different time today.

He just got the gate slammed closed in time to prevent a scrawny brown and white heifer from testing the freedom of the road. It would be a long hard piece of work getting Henry Cato into the ground, regardless of how many backhoes they used.

He followed the Wrights across the open pasture for several minutes, the ground gently undulating, covered to hubcap depth by gently waving grasses. It ruffled like the fur of some giant golden animal as the wind swept across. As the sun shone down striking it from one side it made the grass shine bright yellow. Bammert noted that in his rearview mirror, the same grass looked dark and sinister as he was seeing the shadowed underside. He also noticed another car and a pickup truck hoving into view, coming through the gate back up by the windmill.

After driving perhaps another three quarters of a mile, and getting over enough of the gentle roll of the terrain to make even the windmill and the fence line drop over the horizon, the lead car pulled to a stop. They had been following no road, not even a jeep track. At first Bammert thought they were stopping for some random reason and it passed through

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his own mind and somewhat boggy prostate gland that he might just step out to relieve himself, except that there were ladies in the other car and there was nothing to step behind to maintain the amenities as he saw them.

There was an old trick thereabouts, when one had to "pisseth against the wall" out along a busy new Interstate highway. A couple of gents could park on a shoulder, and walk out to where the fence line separated public land from private. Then to do the old magic show distraction trick, as pissers were coming out, one or the other of the fellows would point away off in the distance, out to the horizon off the road as though pointing something out to the other. If it worked right, to any offendable little old lady motorist, their attention would be drawn to the horizon where stood "two Texas cattle-barons indicating their plan for taming the vast expanse, instead of two piss drunk cowpokes, returning the rental on their last six-packs. It was a piece of high-plains elegance when done well.

Crowder Bob, not too bright to begin with, and who was often letting fly with a couple of six-packs, was known to get all the parts wrong. Henry Cato once came upon Crowder Bob standing on the yellow stripe smack in the middle of the main blacktop in town, pissing against traffic, and pointing directly at the little old ladies as they swerved to avoid getting a car wash.

It was, coincidentally The Fourth of July and there were multiple shooters at Crowder from the crowds of fireworks-armed kids opened up on him, also setting the grass afire in a few spots, enough anyway to generate a monster-movie smoke screen. Henry Cato said he looked like Godzilla pissing in Tokyo Bay.

Today Bammert's bladder capacity would have to serve however, because as surprised as he was he saw that there in the dead middle of the pasture, Pete Wright was

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already setting up some sort of old canvas marquee. Hard by that lay the gaping entrance of Henry Cato's eternal grave.

Bammert took the moment to survey the scene and even he had to admit there was a certain sublime desolation to it. Out of sight of the nearest man-made fixture, which was the last windmill, the grave site lay in a little fold in the land. To the east, perhaps two-hundred yards was a low bluff beneath which water obviously flowed in its season in the irregular rains. When it did come, the water found the land so hard-packed and claysome that it sunk in little, instead running down the fold and on the way carving out the low white bluff, and on into the barely more mighty Canadian River. A few dramatic little trees, perhaps called bonsai in Japan, but to Bammert's eye just plain scrawny, eked out existence in the bottom of the potential watercourse, waiting their next drink which might come that year, or which may not. These would look up at Henry Cato from a respectable distance down the hill.

To the south, the land opened up to the wide, flat staked-plains that were what this part of the country was about. From even the slight rise upon which they stood, Bammert could see without obstruction all the way to a horizon so flat and so far away that one imagined one's eye-lights simply whimpering with defeat and distance and falling out of the air before they got all the way to the edge and back with their report. He noted that the grave, either its head or its foot, was sighted directly down the long blue vista of the fold. It made his head swim a moment when he realized that all that could be seen there was Double W land.

Behind them, to the north and west, back toward the windmill and the gate, the ground rose slightly to the small ridge they had topped coming in. There were a few faint sets of tire

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tracks beaten faintly through the dry prairie grass, but even these would soon be smoothed by the motion of the wind as it swept down on them there.

The two vehicles that Bammert had seen came over the ridge and made their way down the hillside. One was a dirty, black-on-black Corvette Stingray with darkly tinted glass. The right front quarter-panel was a mass of splintered fiberglass and the headlight hung like a useless eyeball out of its socket. Henry Cato's youngest son, Vinton was in the driver's seat of the disheveled Corvette. The other vehicle was Hardpan Hawkins' late model Chevy pick-up. Henry himself was in a plain but neat wooden coffin in the back of the pickup.

Vinton pulled the low black car up next to the Wright family car in which his mother and Grandmother still sat, waiting for Pete and a small crew to get the sun shelter erected. The two cars were too far away for Bammert to hear the conversation, but it wasn't a long one, and the Corvette pulled on around to the back of the impromptu lot that was being established just upwind of the gravesite.

Bammert knew both the Wright boys, Vinton, who was now twenty and his older brother, Tyler. They had both been in the town's Boy Scout troop, Tyler becoming an Eagle Scout, and Vinton, basically being given a "section-eight" out for a seemingly interminable list of lesser and greater infractions against not only the Scouting handbook, but more and more frequently against the municipal peace, and finally against the state and federal criminal codes. He had never served any actual prison time to date, but that was mostly through the good offices of his father, of whom he was now bereft, and of his mother, who maintained a "blood is thicker than water" attitude about her boy. It was becoming increasingly difficult however, even for her.

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Tyler, who was a First Lieutenant in the Marine Corps had only recently used the last of his available leave time to travel from South Carolina to personally whip the dog water out of his younger brother for "Fuckin' up and breakin' Momma's heart again." Tyler was now on board a ship in the Indian Ocean and was not expected back for the funeral. This was no doubt a comfort to the younger sibling, based on all that had gone before in the relatively smaller versions. Martha realized in that moment, in the back of the sweltering sedan, that though she had successfully, if ineptly and tragically, petitioned for the life of her child, that the threat to him was not over. She would have to be aware of Tyler and Vin for the rest of all their lives. Bammert thought it strange that Martha and Miz Aggie seemed unconcerned about Tyler's absence. Actually, it was not at all out of character for the family. The Family had been built in this generation, around Henry Cato, and it was perfectly within Cato's range that he had left a note to Tyler (but not one to Vinton) telling him that it was perfectly all right for him to miss the actual "planting", as long as he would make it post-haste to the nearest Officer's Club and have a drink of Beam in memoriam. This would be considered manly discharge of filial mourning.

Vinton, or Vin, as he was known locally had just left the family home again the night his father died. To where, no one knew, and a usual, out of touch. He was currently under indictment for possession of cocaine, apparently quite a lot, but out on bail, curtesy of his father's position as owner and operator of the bail bond shop and silent creditor of several of the local figures in the political and legal establishments.

Henry Cato had long ago gone through every lecture he could dredge up to inspire Vinton to "apply himself" to something useful. Cato had had enough sense to realize that there wasn't enough to do on the ranch to absorb even his own naturally high energy, but he had

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enough lack of sense to decide that bail-bonding , and the attendant bounty hunting it entailed, would be an interesting and useful substitute. It had certainly come in handy in helping to deal with Vinton's continuing legal problems, and thus the family's. On the other hand it had certainly not improved the class of the people Cato found himself running, and drinking, and occasionally, shooting it out, with.

And Henry Cato was a good shot. He needed to be, but that was mostly his own fault. Hardpan Hawkins said he was with him one afternoon coming from the ranch, in to Tranquey's when Henry suddenly pulled his truck off on one of the back streets of town and cruised slowly past and especially run-down mobile home. There was a serious looking Harley sort of tucked away on the side of the place, and when Cato gave a short sharp hiss between his teeth, Hardpan knew something was up.

"There he is," said Wright. "Let's go get him."

"Who you talking about?" replied Hawkins, eyeing the bike and imagining its owner.

"Ain't nobody I know of I need real bad to get."

"That's ol' Big Rick in there. He jumped on me for our thousand dollars. I figured he'd be back though." Wright said this as he eased the truck to a stop and cut the engine. Hawkins said he was getting big eyed by this time. "Look, Henry, I'll just walk on over to Tranquey's and have a beer, O.K.? Let me know when you're done." Cato wasn't paying much attention to Hawkins by this point he just kept staring at the mobile home, and Hawkins knew he was figuring his tactical plan. His teeth were clenching now such that Hardpan could hear them grind and every so often, he would let out an unconscious hiss, like a steam train holding on a siding.

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"Henry, this old boy is bad, and he got an awful big load of whup ass. You want me to call Sheriff Tobbs on my way over to the bar for you? You want me to do that?"

"You call Tobbs and I'll whup you myself," said Wright, without turning his head his attention from the objective. "You comin' with me or not?"

"Goddamnit, Henry...., aw, what the hell..." resigned Hawkins.

"Good, open that glove box there." Inside was Henry Cato's .357 Ruger. Hawkins handed it to him. "You take the Winchester here, "he said levelly, indicating the rifle in the rack behind them. "Its loaded, so when I start in you jes' slip around the back and cover that side in case there's a back door. That's all you gotta do."

With the big pistol held down out of sight behind his thigh, he had walked steadily to the wrought iron porch and gently tried the door. It was locked. He motioned for Hawkins to go around back, so all that Hardpan knew was that a couple of seconds later there was a boom as Wright shot the handle off and kicked in the trailer door. As it happened there was no opening in the backside of the firetrap at all, except a tiny window much too small for the likes of this desperado grande, so Hawkins made his way back around to the front. Just in time to see a huge fellow in biker leather come flying out the front door and bust down the rail of the porch. He clambered to his feet and turned, about twenty feet from the doorway and Hawkins could see that he had a pistol himself. Cato was standing on the porch now, blood running down his lip, with the Ruger held out in front of him.

"Give it up, asshole!" he shouted clearly. It was a tense second, eyeball to eyeball as it looked like the big man might comply. Hawkins was just relaxing his grip on the Winchester, when however the big fellow got confused and apparently thought better of giving himself up

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and so he jerked a shot off at Wright, exploding the porchlight, not a foot from Henry's left shoulder. Henry Cato aimed carefully and deliberately at his target, giving Hawkins time to just begin to recover his wits, and giving Rick time to get off another round, which, because it was fired in panic also went wide, plucking the slack in Henry's shirt sleeve. The Ruger gave one short, deep, popping cough and Rick was knocked backward as though he had been hit in the center of his chest with a hundred-pound rock. Before he had quite hit the ground however, Wright fired once more, again hitting Rick solidly in the center of his bulky mass. Big Rick hit the ground on his back and bounced once. He stayed exactly that way, with not a movement, not a breath, his unfocused eyes open, a completely sprung object.

Cato kept him level covered for another ten seconds to be sure. Then he lowered the pistol, looked around at Hawkins and said, "Damnit! He should have known better than to pull a gun on me." They had spent about an hour dealing with the aftermath with Sheriff Tobbs, the rest of the evening at Tranquey's as planned, and the next days they were all up early fixing the fence on a back pasture.

Henry Cato Wright took weapons seriously and maintained a collection of all types in the house, and a private sort of gun range in La ong Quonset hut next to a barn out on one of the back pastures. His collection included everything up to a quasi-legally licensed .45 caliber machine gun, an old prototype Browning version that had lost out to the Thompson back in the 1930's. But his "usual" pistol was the big Ruger Magnum revolver, with which in his time he ~~had~~ killed two, or depending on the way you looked at it, three men. The pistol with which he had lived and by which he had died.

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By now there were other vehicles coming over the ridge to the gravesite, and even a few people walking in the distance, having left cars and trucks at the windmill gate. Among those vehicles coming down to the grave was a nondescript pickup truck that at one point in history might have been blue. In the driver's seat was a small figure, who looked around through a squinched-up left eye and an obvious alcoholic haze. The pickup slowed to a halt and the wizened little fellow got out, squinted around as though to orient himself, and spat a big wad of brown tobacco juice down by the truck's front tire. To see him accomplish this was an amazing thing, because having no teeth in his head at all, his shapeless lips went through what could only be termed spectacular machinations to eject the livered colored bolus. Granted, once out, it arced heroically and fairly exploded against the tire, dead on the valve stem.

Clutching the door of the truck for support, he turned to the bed of the vehicle and withdrew a small black case of battered leather from under the large auxiliary gas tank. Balancing it in the edge of the pickup bed, he opened it and pulled out an equally battered violin.

This was Morris, "The String Shorty" Bates. Also in Henry Cato's bequests was the specification that he wanted Three String to play a medley of his favorite classic tunes. Many was the time Cato had called for a song at a dance or sometime in the evening down at Tranquey's, and something about Shorty's particular esthetic apparently seemed to resonate in his soul. Cato had been known to become so maudlin as to actually cry to Shorty's "Red River Valley." He had also been known to begin firing random shots at the ceiling in a definitive percussion accompaniment to "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight?"

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Shorty was at Tranquey's more than Cato, which said a great deal about the state of his liver, if not the state of ^{his} soul. He was a sort of human jukebox there. Now he began to weave the fiddle up to position under his chin and started to saw out the first notes of "Pretty Redwing", but the formalities not having actually started, Bammert quietly suggested that he might hold off a bit and have a rest out of the sun before he began to play. Truth be told, Bammert and the ladies felt at least temporarily spared the discord of the melodies and the memories they represented. Shorty was satisfied as Hardpan Hawkins pulled full case of quart bottles of Beam out of his own pickup where it lay next to the coffin. He opened the box and pulled a bottle out, opened it, took one long test pull sort of like a wine captain, smacked his lips with satisfaction and handed the rest of the bottle to Shorty to inspire his playing.

Pete now had the tent up, the ladies, and perhaps twenty others had seats in fold up wooden chairs that had arrived in yet another pickup. In the front row, of course, sat Martha and Miz Aggie. There was a space saved for Pete and then the sunglassed figure of Vinton.

Vin sat slightly apart from, and to Bammert's eye, somewhat ill at ease with the family. And well he should, thought the preacher. He didn't look like a Wright, for one thing. Though neither Henry or Pete were particularly big men, there was nothing "slack" about either of them. Vinton was scrawny rather than wiry like his father and uncle, and everything from his long thin unwashed hair to his nondescript dull black leather shoes and thin wrinkled tie spoke lankness. He slumped back in his hard wooden chair, occasionally shifting about nervously and chewing his fingernails.

Bammert remembered from one brief report he had from Miz Aggie on the steps of the church several months before, on a Sunday morning after Cato and Martha had had to track

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Vinton all the way to the Amarillo City jail to get him out after he had wrapped Martha's Pontiac around a light pole and split his forehead open on the windshield to boot. Vin had "borrowed" her car after wrecking the one she had given him before, and now supposedly having no need for one as his driver's license had been suspended. This was part of a larger arrangement and if he was found driving again he would forfeit several thousand dollars in bail equivalent, all of which would be out of Henry's pocket, of course. Neither Martha or his Uncle Pete went into that with him just now. Aggie had told the preacher that Martha said the doctors at the city hospital had not even used any novocaine when they sewed up the wound. Vinton had been "too high to notice", they said. Henry Cato had clenched his jaw and had told the police sergeant, whom he knew well, that Vinton "didn't need any more Goddamned anesthetic above his neck.

Martha had gotten back to the house that morning as the sun was rising, with swollen red eyes and a wad of damp Kleenex gripped in her hand. Vinton had long ago "borrowed" everything that was not nailed down or red hot in the house, and in an attempt to take a new tack, thy had set him up in his own apartment in Amarillo to get him into "a new situation." He spent his rent money on cocaine and to help keep a comfortable roof over his head he had taken in a room mate to "split the rent." This roomie was a young fellow who made his living selling cocaine and amphetamines to the rig crews in the oil patch bars around there. None of that had done Vinton any good.

It had just basically gotten to the point that Martha just wanted Vinton to stay away, because she was terrified that he might do something ultimately stupid, like stealing from his

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father, and she could clearly see that such a thing would end in death at Henry Cato's hand. She had been right, though she had been wrong about whose death it would be.

Trying to stay cool under the canvas, Bammert thought that pretty much everyone who was going to show up was now there, and it was no mean crowd to be sure. He nodded to Pete and Three String Shorty. By now however, Shorty's head was down and he was sort of drooling down his folded and grizzled old chin. Hawkins gently shook him by the scruff of his jacket and as Shorty wobbled the instrument to his chin, drooling on it as well and began to saw.

Bammert flinched involuntarily. Hawkins came over to the preacher and standing beside him he scanned the horizon back toward the gate and said, "Well I wonder if Crowder Bob is going to show up. He liked Ol' Cato powerful. But then I guess we was the only 'uns could much stand Bob, so he'd not got much choice."

Crowder Bob lived alone, and other than his work as a "hand" on the Double W, there was little else to his bachelor existence. He mixed closely with people rarely and so he had more or less forgotten that he needed to bathe his huge bulk. Cato maintained that there were folds and bulges of Crowder's vast carcass that were still totally unexplored., certainly by anything like soap and water. If the crew was doing a day or two of work during the "busy" season, at branding or plowing, Hardpan or Cato might, almost as a joke, require Bob to take his rightful turn at going into town to the supermarket to pick up fixings for a sandwich lunch in the field.

Crowder Bob's idea of a "samwich" for one was one small loaf of white bread, one small sized jar of mayonnaise, and a large plastic wrapped package of bologna or pickle loaf. He drank beer by the even six pack, one or two of them for lunch and a two-pound bag of potato chips

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for garnish would round out the meal. And then, of course, Crowder Bob liked dessert, so that could get into the double digits on the receipt tape.

All this sale represented a tactical success for the merchant, of course, but it usually represented a much worse strategic loss, because at least in hot weather, if Bob simply plodded up and down the aisles of a grocery store for a few minutes doing his shopping, management noticed that for some time afterward, total sales would go down. Customers would often innocently ask if even the next day whether the store "might be trying to stretch out the old meat a little too long, or something." Crowder Bob's lingering aroma, just simply, "put'em off their feed."

By now it was past noon and the Beam was going around pretty good at the graveside and Bammert noted that two or three other mourners had each brought full cases of whiskey, now stacked respectfully near the grave, and he figured that Crowder Bob or no Crowder Bob, the sooner the ceremony was performed and done and at least his part was over, the better he would feel about it.

Shorty sawed on. Bammert nodded and smiled patronizingly at him., making a subtle motion with his hands indicating that Shorty had done well but that he could now bring the musical portion of the program to a close so that he, The Reverend Bammert could get on with the funeral. Shorty however couldn't see very well, not any better, in fact, than he could hear, and he wouldn't have known a patronizing look if it came from the Grand Potentate of Siam. Besides there were at least fifteen songs to which he knew Cato had been partial, and he was going to play them all and every one come hell or high water. Shorty sawed on.

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Bammert was stuck for what to do. Being a teatotal Baptist he wasn't about to join in the part of the funeral that Henry Cato had requested, and he was beginning to sweat all the way through his suit coat under the arms, so he determined that he would just begin to preach and see what happened.

He caught Miz Aggie's eye to acquire her quite consent, but that worthy lady was apparently still out of current touch, and just looked at him like he hadn't shut the gate. Martha however, recognizing his general discomfiture, gave him a half-hearted smile and nodded that he might as well begin.

Bammert knew enough about people to have understood when a man feels isolated, on unfamiliar ground, amongst people who suddenly seem strange to him, that his natural reaction might be fear. He was not, however, a subtle enough thinker to understand how that fear might be transmuted into irritation or even to anger at some level.

But, with the ceremony depending, at least in his own mind, upon him, he had no time for cool contemplation of these effects. He felt his tight button-down collar chafe and he very much wanted to, but very much could not, loosen his tie, at exactly this moment. Not per the Baptist Playbook. And he more or less settled on his message there in that instant and began.

"I made me great works," he began.

As he launched into his message, he heard Hardpan protest quietly to one of the other onlookers, "But Bob ain't here." Bammert made as if the fiddle music, which continued in spite of his best efforts, had kept him from hearing the remark.

"I builded me houses" his text recalled from Ecclesiastes. "I planted me vineyards, I made me gardens and orchards and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits."

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He had gotten at least some degree of attention from the crowd though he very much wanted the damned fiddle to break in two. "I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees; I got me servants and maidens. And had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasures of the kings and of the provinces; I gat me men singers ad women singers and the delights of the sons of man, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts." At this last sonorous passage, Three String Shorty, who had seemed totally immersed in his art, broke off at the end of a bar and waved his fiddle bow to the crowd as though to acknowledge this accolade as though it were direct to him from Solomon himself. At least, Bammert thought, at least he's shut up now from playing. But before the preacher could get a good lungful and dive back into the next verse, Shorty had picked up where he left off, working through a highly tremelo version of "Lorena."

Bammert plunged on, still competing with Shorty's fiddle. "I was great, an increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem, also my wisdom remained with me; and whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them." Vinton shifted nervously in his hard chair.

"I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor, and all this was all my portion of all my labor." He paused for effect. "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun. At this, Martha shook her head and the tears came, and Pete put his arm around her. Miz Aggie continued to look Bammert dead in the eye. "And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly, for

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what can the man do that cometh after the king? Even that which hath already been done.”

There he closed the book and looked for a moment on the coffin, which had been brought to the edge of the grave and stood now on two low saw-horses.

Bammert's head swam with the heat, and he felt totally out of place and alien to this little congregation. Try as he might, he just could not summon up a healing spirit with which to give balm. Even Aggie was just an ancient object now, Martha and Pete were strangers, Vinton an annoyance, and the rest of these people he held to be mostly drunkards and reprobates. Much, he thought, like the man who brought them all together.

“for there I no more remembrance of the wise more than of the fool forever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool.”

Pete Wright looked up from consoling his sister-in-law and carefully watched and listened for Bammert's next move. He was, by now, the only one of the audience who was sane, sober, and not totally distracted by grief.

“Therefore I hated life:” Pete considered rising to pitch the preacher out on his ass. “Because the work that is done under the sun is grievous unto me...” Pete indeed began to rise, a deep growl beginning to come from his chest and blood about to spurt from his eye. But as he rose, Martha was still holding on to him. And in an instant he realized that she was no longer holding on to him for support, but rather just pulling him back down into his seat.

Her bitter prayer had been answered that terrible night when Cato died. She had prayed that Cato would not kill Vinton. “For all is vanity and vexation of spirit,” concluded the minister nervously, having noted Pete's motions.

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"Vanity and vexation..." whispered Martha, nodding softly. "Yep, that about covers it."

"Let us pray." Said Bammert quickly.

"Naw, lets don't." said Pete.

"Les have a drank..." said Hardpan Hawkins. The crowd murmured assent.

"But...", spluttered Bammert. "But this is a funeral! Miz Aggie..." he said, appealing to the old lady.

"Well, she said, coming back to the here and very much now, "It's Cato's funeral, It ain't yours, yet." For just an instant Bammert blanched at the thought that the real reason he had even been asked out to this definitively God forsaken spot was to serve as some sort of Homeric funeral sacrifice. He tried to remember if he had actually told his wife about specifically coming to do this funeral or if his various parts and pieces would simply be pitched into the caliche pyramid to anonymously fetch and carry for the shade of Henry Cato Wright forever on the West side of the Great River. Though the crowd basically ignored him, he was panicked, and just as he took one uncertain step backward, and was about to invoke the protection and authority of the Southern Baptist Conference, there came the sound of yet another vehicle from over the gate ridge. Being the only one there not familiar with the flatulant bass notes of Bob's tune-up as heard through a duck-tape and bailing wir-ed on muffler, Bammert turned to see the rattleclank old green Gremlin come over the hill.

What he, and everyone else except Bob himself, noted, was that the hot muffler was dragging along and there was a neat avenue of flame springing up in the dry grass behind the car as it came down the hill toward them. Everyone watched in stupefied amazement.

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Pete was distracted from the preacher and stepped out to wave his arms at Crowder Bob to turn him away short of the crowd itself. Crowder Bob however, blithely figured that at least someone was glad to see him, and gratefully stuck his mammoth arm out the window to wave back to everyone who seemed so eager to greet him. It wasn't until he pulled into the middle of the parked vehicles and stopped and Hardpan yelled at him, "Goddamnit Bob, you settin' everthing on fahr!", that he even had a clue.

By then the smoke from the blaze was catching up to him and he totally panicked, like a bull in a burning barn. He tried to back out and then he tried to go on forward but it didn't matter by now. The whole ridge was blazing and the prairie fire was picking up speed and heading down the wind and down the hill toward the gathering.

Pete started a step toward the coffin, but quickly judging the fire and wind and distance, stopped and turned back to get his mother, whom he more or less jostled up on his shoulder and shagged down to the bare soil of the bluff, which was the nearest and only firebreak for at least a mile around. Shorty continued to play as he marched along with the refugees from the blaze, striking up "There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" after opening yet another bottle of Beam. He walked toward the bluff as he played with the bottle stuck in the waist of his baggy pants, following the rest as they scurried, or wove, or staggered toward that refuge.

Once to that relatively safe place, Pete had put his mother down, and noted that both Martha and Vinton had made it too. Hardpan had sort of wrangled everybody else up a faint path to that point. Bammert had been left to scramble down the face of the bluff with what aplomb he could muster, sliding down the better part of the white chalk and in a dampened dark suit, he looked like a badly erased blackboard.

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Looking back, scratched, sweating, his shiny black coat grimed in dull white, he could see that the improvised parking lot was engulfed, as was the canvas of the tent over the gravesite. He couldn't see the coffin any longer at all for the flame and smoke. The tires of a couple of the older vehicles had begun to burn and just at that moment the gas tank in the back of Shorty's truck caught fire and soon the whole place was a great blinding conflagration of golden flame and gray smoke under the clear blue sky.

Then for an instant the wind shifted and the smoke peeled back. Bammert could see the coffin, still sitting on its saw-horses, now robustly on fire. The several cases of whiskey, at just that moment collapsed toward the coffin, and as they crashed to the ground under it, boiled and burst open. There was another great whoosh, and a column of lighter gold fire leaped upward from the rest of the flames.

"There he goes!" shouted Hawkins, pointing to the rising billow. "Yeeeeeeehaa! Yes Sir! Spit in Old Satan's eye, Cato!"

There being little that they could do about it anyway, the crowd huddled together on the bluff that afternoon as the fire swept on around them, mostly keeping themselves cooled with an occasional pull on the Beam. Shorty continued to play, now striking up "Oh, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," and occasionally letting out a cackle or whoop of his own.

Crowder Bob had finally settled down, and the confused bull had turned into a sheep as he approached Miz Aggie his hat in his hand and his eyes to the ground.

"I'm sure sorry I burned up Mr. Henry, ma'am." He stammered, "I didn't mean to do it."

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"Oh, you didn't mean no harm, Bob. And I guess it don't matter anyhow. We'll just fill up the hole and act like that's where he is, I reckon," she said, soothing him, and even wiping away a tear of distress from his massive, sooty cheek.

By the time the fire had died down completely, absolutely nothing had remained in the little fold of land except the melted metal parts of the destroyed automobiles. Pete dragged them out the next week, using the Massey Ferguson. He sat in the cab and drove and Crowder Bob worked the blackened ground, humping the chain around the bumpers and axles. They filled in the grave site and just waited patiently, for they knew given only a little while, the land would be back to its former state.

The next spring, Martha had gotten a stone from a man who carved them special over in Midland. Pete and Hawkins and Crowder Bob had set it up there in the fold above the bluff. Tyler Wright came home to help set his father's monument. It had Henry Cato's name and the dates of his birth and his death, and it carried another inscription, also from Ecclesiastes, "...Also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end."

Martha would visit the place from time to time and just touch the stone. That seemed to help her, when Miz Aggie died, and again when she had to stand aside and watch as Vinton was sent to state prison in Huntsville.

Crowder Bob would sometimes have his lunch there when he was working out in the pastures, and he would puzzle over its meaning, as he puzzled over just about everything.

And the Reverend Tipple Bammert never saw it at all.

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