art of telling big lies about his hunting and shooting was said "to pull the long bow."

Having seen him shoot once, though, I myself never acted on the assumption that he lied about what he could do with firearms. I had seen a friend of his throw five aspirin tablets in the air which bloomed into five small white flowers immediately following five shots that sounded like one.

I was just as sure he could challenge the champion sheepherder of the Sieben ranch at his own game. The Sieben ranch is one of the finest in western Montana, spreading all the way from the Helena valley to Lincoln and beyond. Its owners, Jean and John Baucus, tell about a favorite sheepherder they once had to take to the hospital where his condition rapidly changed for the worse. They couldn't get his underwear off—it had been on him so long his hair had grown through it. Finally, they had to pluck him like a chicken, and when his underwear finally came off, pieces of skin came with it. At the opening of Long Bow's shirt, which wasn't buttoned for quite a way down, you could see hair sprouting out of his underwear.

On the crate at the other end of the bar was a female character known as Old Rawhide to the goats up and down the Great Northern line. About ten years before, at a Fourth of July celebration she had been elected beauty queen of Wolf Creek. She had ridden bareback standing up through the 111 inhabitants, mostly male, who had lined one of Wolf Creek's two streets. Her skirts flew high, and she won the contest. But, since she didn't quite have what it takes to become a professional rider, she did the next best thing. However, she still wore the divided skirts of a western horsewoman of the day, although they must have been a handicap in her new profession.

For a small town, Wolf Creek loomed large upon the map. It had two almost national celebrities, one a steer wrestler and the other a fancy roper. These two local artists spent their summers at county fairs and were good enough to come out five or six hundred dollars ahead for the season, less, of

course, their hospital expenses. Old Rawhide did not intend to spend the rest of her life as a disappointed athlete, so she would shack up one winter with the fancy roper and the next winter with the steer wrestler. Occasionally, in late autumn when it looked as if it were going to be an especially hard winter, she would marry one of them, but marriage wasn't Old Rawhide's natural state of bliss, and before spring she would be shacked up with the other one. Shacking up brought out Old Rawhide's most enduring and durable qualities, and, unlike marriage, could be counted on to last all winter.

In the summers, while her artists were living off hot dogs at county fairs and rupturing their intestines while twisting the necks of steers, Old Rawhide inhabited Black Jack's Bar, reduced to picking up stray fishermen, most of them bait and hardware fishermen from Great Falls, so for her, as for the rest of the world, life had its ups and downs. However, she didn't show much the effects of life's gravitational pulls. Like many fancy riders, she was rather small and very tough and very strong, especially in the legs. She had weathered enough to deserve her name, but she didn't look much older than her thirty years spent mostly with horses and horsemen and the sporting element of Great Falls.

Even when she and Long Bow were at the bar, they sat at opposite ends so that itinerant fishermen had to sit between them and buy the drinks.

That's where Neal and I sat when we came in.

"Hi, Long Bow," Neal said, and overshook his hand. Long Bow did not like to be called Long Bow, although he knew he was called Long Bow behind his back , but to Neal he was just plain old Long Bow, and after a couple of shots of 3-7-77 Neal was outshooting, outhunting, and outtrapping the government trapper.

There was something deep in Neal that compelled him to lie to experts, even though they knew best that he was lying. He was one of those who need to be caught telling a lie while he is telling it.

As for Old Rawhide, Neal hadn't looked at her yet. I was already wise to the fact that Neal's opening ploy with women was to ignore them, and indeed was beginning to recognize what a good opening it is.

The mirror behind the bar looked like a polished Precambrian mudstone with ripples on it. Neal watched it constantly, evidently fascinated by the dark distorted image of himself living automatically—buying all the drinks and doing all the talking and none of the listening. I tried to break the monopoly by talking to Old Rawhide who was sitting next to me, but she was aware only of being ignored so she ignored me.

Finally, I listened, since no one would listen to me, although I didn't go so far as to buy the drinks. Neal had trailed an otter and her pups up to Rogers Pass, where the thermometer officially recorded 69.7 degrees below zero. While he trailed this otter, I tried to trace its lineage from his description of it. "I had a hard time following it," he said, "because it had turned white in the winter," so it must have been part ermine. After he treed her, he said, "She stretched out on the lower branch ready to pounce on the first deer that came along," so she had to have a strain of mountain lion in her. She also must have been part otter, because she was jokey and smiled at him. But mostly she was 3-7-77, because she was the only animal in western Montana besides man that had pups in the winter. "They snuggled up right in my shirt," he said, showing us a shirt under his two red-white-and-blue sweaters.

Long Bow gently tapped the thick bottom of his empty glass on the bar, without saying a word for fear of appearing inattentive. But Old Rawhide couldn't stand the silent treatment any longer, no matter what. She leaned in front of me and said to the side of Neal's face, "Hey, Buster, what are otters doing on the top of the Continental Divide? I thought otters swam in creeks and played on mud slides?"

Neal stopped in the middle of a sentence and stared at the mirror, trying to pick out the distortion other than his own which had spoken. "Let's have another drink," he said to all

the distortions. Then for the first time he formally recognized that a woman was present by looking not at the image but at the reality of Black Jack behind the bar, and saying, "Give her one, too."

Old Rawhide closed her hand when a drink was put in it, but kept on staring at Neal's profile. In the ranch town of Wolf Creek, she and the Great Northern goat had probably seen only a couple of other men who were pale and had sunken eyes.

As I pushed myself out of my crate to keep my promise to go home early, Long Bow said, "Thanks." Since I hadn't bought a drink all evening, I knew he must be thanking me for leaving them my brother-in-law. The moment I rose from my crate, Old Rawhide moved into it to be closer to Neal. She peered into his profile, and romance stirred under her epidermis.

On the way out, I said to Neal over my shoulder, "Don't forget, you're going fishing tomorrow morning," and he looked over her shoulder and said, "What?"

Paul was in Wolf Creek early next morning, just as he said he would be. Although he and I had acquired freedoms as we grew up, we never violated our early religious training of always being on time for church, work, and fishing.

Florence met him at the door and said nervously, "I'm sorry, Paul, but Neal isn't up yet. He got home late."

Paul said, "I didn't even go to bed last night. Get him up, Florence."

She said, "He isn't very well."

He said, "Neither am I, but I am going fishing in a few minutes."

They stared at each other. No Scottish mother likes to be caught with a lazy son in bed, and no Scot going fishing likes to stand around waiting for a male relative with a hangover. Although the Scots invented whiskey, they try not to acknowledge the existence of hangovers, especially within the family circle. Normally, it would have been no better than a standoff between my brother and my mother-in-law, but in

this rare case a Scottish lady couldn't think of a thing to say in her son's defense, so she had to wake him up, although as little as possible.

We slowly loaded the half-ton truck that belonged to Kenny, my one brother-in-law who had remained in Wolf Creek. The three women had already covered the shady end of the box with an old mattress, and then they covered the mattress with their relative from the West Coast. After space had been found for the potato salad, the grill and our fishing tackle, six of us tried to be comfortable without in any way disturbing the mattress.

All but the first three miles of the road to the Elkhorn parallels the Missouri as it emerges from the gigantic opening that Lewis and Clark called the Gateway to the Mountains. Although the water remains clear for a few miles farther down, the earth itself turns tawny almost the moment the river pours out of the mountains. It is just below the dark opening where the Elkhorn empties into the Missouri that the road ends. Like most dirt roads paralleling the Missouri, it is mostly gray dust and chuckholes. The chuckholes did not improve Neal's health, and the gray dust would turn to gumbo if it rained.

Kenny, as the one of Jessie's brothers who stayed in Wolf Creek, was like most who live in towns with two streets—he could do nearly anything with his hands. Among other things, he could drive a half-ton truck over country where it would be hard to take a pack mule, and he had married Dorothy, a registered nurse. She was short and powerful and had been trained as a surgical nurse. Ranchers holding their intestines in their hands would ride in from the back country looking for the "the RN" to sew them together again. Florence and Jessie were also medical in varying degrees, and the three of them were thought of as the medical center of Wolf Creek. Now, the three women bent over an old mattress, constituting, as it were, the intensive-care unit.

Ken was friendly with all 111 inhabitants of Wolf Creek and most of the ranchers in the surrounding country, especially

with the ranchers from Scotland, who had come to the West early, knowing ahead of time how to raise cattle in mountains and snow. That's how we got permission to fish in the Elkhorn. Jim McGregor owned it to its headwaters, and every fence was posted, reading from top to bottom, "No Hunting," "No Fishing," and finally, as an afterthought, "No Trespassing." As a result, he furnished pasture for about as many elk as cows, but he figured this was cheaper than opening his range to hunters from Great Falls who have difficulty telling an elk from a cow.

One thing about a ranch road—there is less and less of it the closer it gets to the cows. It became just two ruts that made switchbacks to the top of a ridge, and then it repeated roughly the same number down to the Elkhorn, which is just a curve of willows and water winding through high grass until suddenly a mountain opens and the willows disappear. At the top of the ridge the ruts were still made of gray dust, and black clouds rested upon the black mountains ahead.

Paul was out of the truck as soon as it stopped at the creek bottom. He had his rod up and his leader and flies on before I could free myself from the vise in which I had been sitting between Dorothy and Jessie, who had been holding me tight by the soft part of the arm and muttering, "Don't you run off and leave my brother." Besides, I had to hop around for a minute or so, because a leg had gone to sleep in the vise.

By that time, Paul was saying behind his back, "I'll walk three fishing distances down and then fish upstream. You spread out and fish downstream until we meet." Then he was gone.

One reason Paul caught more fish than anyone else was that he had his flies in the water more than anyone else. "Brother," he would say, "there are no flying fish in Montana. Out here, you can't catch fish with your flies in the air." His outfit was set up ready to go the moment he stepped out of the car; he walked fast; he seldom wasted time changing flies but instead changed the depth he was fishing them or the motion with which he retrieved them; if he did change flies, he tied knots

with the speed of a seamstress; and so on. His flies were in the water at least twenty percent more of the time than mine.

I guessed there was also another reason why today he was separating himself from me as fast and as far as possible—he did not want me to talk to him about the other night.

Ken said he would go upstream to fish the beaver dams. He liked beaver dams and he knew how to fish them. So off he went happily to wade in ooze and to get throttled by brush and to fall through loose piles of sticks called beaver dams and to end up with a wreath of seaweed round his neck and a basketful of fish.

Jessie gave me another pinch on the arm and shortened her warning to, "Don't leave my brother." Rubbing my arm, I made him go first so he couldn't escape immediately. We went down the trail around the first bend where the creek comes out of osiers and crosses a meadow. Then his steps faltered and became intentionally pitiful. "I'm still not well," he said; "I think I'll stop here and fish the meadow." Because of the bend in the creek, he couldn't be seen, and yet, if he walked back, he would have only a couple of hundred yards to go.

"Why not?" I asked, already knowing a foolish question when I asked one.

Even though Paul must have had three or four fish by now, I took my time walking down the trail, trying with each step to leave the world behind. Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart—I don't know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere deep. Many of us probably would be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect.

The hardest thing usually to leave behind, as was the case now, can loosely be called the conscience.

Should or shouldn't I speak to my brother about what happened the other night? I referred to it vaguely as "what happened the other night" so as not to visualize it, especially not the casting hand. Shouldn't I at least offer to help him

with money, if he has to pay damages? I thought about these old questions in new forms now framed by long dancing legs spread on a jail floor until finally the questions of conscience disappeared, again as usual, without any answers to them. I still didn't know whether I had resolved to talk to my brother today.

However, I still kept worrying about something, whatever it was, until I turned around in the trail and went back to the meadow so I could say that I had.

Across the meadow was a dam and above it a big blue hole where Neal sat nodding on a rock, the red Hills Bros. coffee can beside him. His neck was bowed, pale, exposed to the sun and soon to match the coffee can.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

It took him some time to arrange an answer. "I have been fishing," he said finally. Then he tried over again for greater accuracy. "I have been fishing and not feeling well," he said.

"This dead water isn't much of a place to fish, is it?" I asked.

"Why," he said, "look at all those fish at the bottom of the hole."

"Those are squaw fish and suckers," I told him, without looking.

"What's a sucker?" he asked, and so became the first native of Montana ever to sit on a rock and ask what a sucker was.

In the deep water below him was a little botch of pink that was sure to be angleworms with one hook running through all their guts. On the leader, just above the worms, were two red beads, strung there no doubt for cosmetic purposes. The botch of angleworms and the two beads hung within six inches of the nearest sucker. Not a fish stirred, and neither did the fisherman, although both were in plain view of each other.

"Would you like to go fly fishing sometime with Paul and me?" I asked.

"Thanks," he said, "but not just now."

"Well, then," I said, "take care of yourself and have a good time."

"I am," he said.

I walked down the trail again under the mistaken notion I might have done myself some good by going back to see my brother-in-law. However, that big cloud coming out of the entrance to the Rocky Mountains kept telling me that, much as I was looking for moments of perfection, I wasn't going to find any today. And also that I wasn't going to catch many fish unless I quit fooling around.

I turned off the trail at the next meadow, and could have caught my limit in two or three holes. Because Jim McGregor allowed only a few fishermen a year on this small creek, it was overpopulated with fish that would probably never grow longer than ten or eleven inches.

I had only one problem in catching them and it lasted for only the first few fish. I was too fast in setting the hook. There is a barb on the end of the hook, and unless the hook gets imbedded in the fish's mouth or jaw deep enough to "set" the barb in it, the fish spits or tears the hook out. So, as the fish strikes, the line has to be given a little jerk, either directly with the left hand or with the rod in the right hand. The timing and the pressure have to be perfect—too soon or too late or too little or too much and the fish may have a sore mouth for a few days but will probably live longer for his experience.

I was setting the fly so fast I was taking it away from the fish before they could get hold of it. Every different kind of trout is on a different speedometer, and the correct timing will vary also with the stream and even the weather and time of day. I had been fishing too long in the fast water of the Big Blackfoot where big Rainbows charge out from behind the fortresses of big rocks. Some early rancher had planted the Elkhorn with Eastern Brook Trout, and, as the name suggests, they are a more meditative type.

Once I got my timing slowed down, I lost interest in them. They are beautiful to see—black backs, yellow and orange spots on their sides, red bellies ending in under-fins fringed with white. They are compositions in colors, and were often painted on platters. But they are only fairly good fighters and they feel like eels because their scales are so small. Besides, their name is against them in western Montana where the

word "brook" is not a socially acceptable substitute for "creek."

All of a sudden I wondered what my brother was doing because I knew he certainly wasn't wasting time catching his limit of ten-inch Eastern Brook Trout. If I wanted to stay in shooting distance of him, I had better start trying to catch some of those Brown monsters that work their way up from the Missouri.

Fishing is a world created apart from all others, and inside it are special worlds of their own—one is fishing for big fish in small water where there is not enough world and water to accommodate a fish and a fisherman, and the willows on the side of the creek are all against the fisherman.

I stopped, cleaned my Eastern Brook Trout, and arranged them in my basket between layers of wild hay and mint where they were more beautiful than those painted on platters. Then, in preparation for big game, I changed to an eight-pound test leader and to a number six fly.

I waxed the first thirty feet of my line in case it had become water-soaked and would not float, took one final look at my ten-inch Eastern Brook Trout lying in mint, and then closed my basket on the world of small fish.

A huge shadow met me coming across the meadow, with one big cloud behind it. The Elkhorn Canyon is so deep and narrow that a black cloud or a cloud and a half can constitute the sky. The black cloud and a half can pass on to sunshine or it can make room for blacker clouds. From the bottom of the canyon, there is no way of seeing what is coming, but I had a feeling it wasn't sunshine.

Suddenly, so many fish began to jump that it looked as if the first extra-large raindrops had arrived. When fish start jumping like this, something is happening to the weather.

At that moment, the world was totally composed of the Elkhorn, a mythological Brown Trout, the weather and me, and all that existed of me were thoughts about the Elkhorn, the weather, and a mythological fish that may have been a fingerling of my imagination.

The Elkhorn looks just like what it is—a crack in the earth

to mark where the Rocky Mountains end and the Great Plains begin. The giant mountains are black-backed with nearly the last of mountain pines. Their eastern sides turn brown and yellow as the tall prairie grasses begin, but there are occasional black spots where the pines scatter themselves out to get a last look back. The mythological Brown Trout and the canyon harmonized in my thoughts. The trout that might be real and close at hand was massive, black on the back, yellow and brown on the sides, had black spots and a final fringe of white. The Elkhorn and the Brown Trout are also alike in being beautiful by being partly ugly.

I walked past 150 or 200 yards of water where little "Brookies" were still bouncing like rain and came finally to a beautiful stretch with not a fish jumping in it. At the head of the hole the water parted on a big rock, swirled backwards, deepened, deposited, and finally lost depth and motion by drifting under osiers. I thought, it can't be that no fish jumps in such beautiful water because no fish is in it. It must be one fish is there so big he is like a bull elk with "a royal head" that in rutting season runs all male contenders out of the herd.

Since it is generally better to fish creeks upstream so the water to be fished next is not dirtied, I stepped back on shore where the fish couldn't see me and walked to the lower end of the hole before making my first cast. By then, I had lost faith in my theory about the one bull elk in the hole, but I did expect to pick up a Brookie or two in the shallow water. When I didn't create a stir, I moved upstream to deeper water where the osiers began and bugs dropped off them.

Not even a glitter in the water from the side of a trout that started for the fly and suddenly decided that something looked wrong. I began to wonder if somebody had thrown a stick of dynamite into the hole and had blown all the fish belly up, along with my one bull-elk theory. If there was one fish in all this water, there was only one place left for him to be—if he wasn't in the open water and if he wasn't around the edges of the osiers, then he had to be under the osiers, and I wasn't happy about the prospect of casting into willow bushes.

Years ago at the end of a summer that I had worked in the

Forest Service I was fishing with Paul, and, being out of practice, I was especially careful to keep in open water. Paul watched me fish a hole that went under willows until he couldn't bear the sight any longer.

"Brother," he said, "you can't catch trout in a bathtub.

"You like to fish in sunny, open water because you are a Scot and afraid to lose a fly if you cast into the bushes.

"But the fish are not taking sunbaths. They are under the bushes where it is cool and safe from fishermen like you."

I only supported his charges in defending myself. "I lose flies when I get mixed up in the bushes," I complained.

"What the hell do you care?" he asked. "We don't pay for flies. George is always glad to tie more for us. Nobody," he said, "has put in a good day's fishing unless he leaves a couple of flies hanging on the bushes. You can't catch fish if you don't dare go where they are.

"Let me have your rod," he said. I suppose he took my rod so I wouldn't think that the cast into the bushes could be done only by his rod. It was in this way that I came to know that my rod can be made to cast into bushes, but the truth is I have never mastered the cast, probably because I still flinch from the prospect of losing flies that I don't have to pay for.

I had no choice now but to cast into the willows if I wanted to know why fish were jumping in the water all around me except in this hole, and I still wanted to know, because it is not fly fishing if you are not looking for answers to questions.

Since I hadn't used this cast for some time, I decided to practice up a bit, so I dropped downstream to make a few casts into the bushes. Then I walked cautiously upstream to where the osiers were thickest, watching my feet and not rattling any rocks.

The cast was high and soft when it went by my head, the opposite of what it would have been if it was being driven into the wind. I was excited, but kept my arm cool and under my control. Instead of putting on power as the line started

forward, I let it float on until the vertical periscope in my eye or brain or arm or wherever it is told me my fly was over the edge of the nearest osiers. Then I put a check cast into the line, and it began to drop almost straight down. Ten or fifteen feet before the fly lights, you can tell whether a cast like this is going to be perfect, and, if necessary, still make slight corrections. The cast is so soft and slow that it can be followed like an ash settling from a fireplace chimney. One of life's quiet excitements is to stand somewhat apart from yourself and watch yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful, even if it is only a floating ash.

The leader settled on the lowest branch of the bush and the fly swung on its little pendulum three or four inches from the water, or maybe it was five or six. To complete the cast, I was supposed next to shake the line with my rod, so, if the line wasn't caught in the bush, the fly would drop into the water underneath. I may have done this, or maybe the fish blew out of the water and took my fly as it soared up the bush. It is the only time I have ever fought a fish in a tree.

Indians used to make baskets out of the red branches of osiers, so there was no chance the branches would break. It was fish or fisherman.

Something odd, detached, and even slightly humorous happens to a big-fish fisherman a moment after a big fish strikes. In the arm, shoulder, or brain of a big-fish fisherman is a scale, and the moment the big fish goes in the air the big-fish fisherman, no matter what his blood pressure is, places the scale under the fish and coolly weighs him. He doesn't have hands and arms enough to do all the other things he should be doing at the same time, but he tries to be fairly exact about the weight of the fish so he won't be disappointed when he catches him. I said to myself, "This son of a bitch weighs seven or eight pounds," and I tried to allow for the fact that I might be weighing part of the bush.

The air was filled with dead leaves and green berries from the osiers, but their branches held. As the big Brown went up

the bush, he tied a different knot on every branch he passed. He wove that bush into a basket with square knots, bowlines, and double half hitches.

The body and spirit suffer no more sudden visitation than that of losing a big fish, since, after all, there must be some slight transition between life and death. But, with a big fish, one moment the world is nuclear and the next it has disappeared. That's all. It has gone. The fish has gone and you are extinct, except for four and a half ounces of stick to which is tied some line and a semitransparent thread of catgut to which is tied a little curved piece of Swedish steel to which is tied a part of a feather from a chicken's neck.

I don't even know which way he went. As far as I know, he may have gone right on up the bush and disappeared into thin air.

I waded out to the bush to see if any signs of reality had been left behind. There was some fishing tackle strung around, but my hands trembled so I couldn't untie the complicated knots that wove it into the branches.

Even Moses could not have trembled more when his bush blew up on him. Finally, I untied my line from the leader and left the rest of the mess in the willows.

Poets talk about "spots of time," but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish and the fish is gone. I shall remember that son of a bitch forever.

A voice said, "He was a big one." It could have been my brother, or it could have been the fish circling back in the air and bragging about himself behind my back.

I turned and said to my brother, "I missed him." He had seen it all, so if I had known of something else I would have mentioned it. Instead, I repeated, "I missed him." I looked down at my hands, and the palms were turned up, as if in supplication.

"There wasn't anything you could have done about it," he said. "You can't catch a big fish in the brush. In fact, I never saw anyone try it before."

I figured he was just trying to sprinkle me with comfort, especially when I couldn't help seeing a couple of gigantic brown tails with gigantic black spots sticking out of his basket. "How did you catch yours?" I asked. I was very excited, and asked whatever I wanted to know.

He said, "I got them in shallow, open water where there weren't any bushes."

I asked, "Big ones like that in shallow, open water?"

He said, "Yes, big Brown Trout. You are used to fishing for big Rainbow in big water. But big Browns often feed along the edges of a bank in a meadow where grasshoppers and even mice fall in. You walk along the shallow water until you can see black backs sticking out of it and mud swirling."

This left me even more dismayed. I thought that I had fished the hole perfectly and just the way my brother had taught me, except he hadn't told me what to do when a fish goes up a tree. That's one trouble with hanging around a master—you pick up some of his stuff, like how to cast into a bush, but you use it just when the master is doing the opposite.

I was still excited. There was still some great hollow inside me to be filled and needed the answer to another question. Until I asked it, I had no idea what it would be. "Can I help you with money or anything?" I asked.

Alarmed by hearing myself, I tried to calm down quickly. Instead, having made a mistake, I made it worse. "I thought you might need some help because of the other night," I said.

Probably he took my reference to the other night as a reference to his Indian girl, so, to change the subject, I said, "I thought maybe it cost you a lot to fix the front end of your car the night you chased the rabbit." Now I had made three mistakes.

He acted as if his father had offered to help him to a bowl of oatmeal. He bowed his head in silence until he was sure I wouldn't say anything more. Then he said, "It's going to rain."

I glanced at the sky which I had forgotten about since the world had become no higher than a bush. There was a sky