

“55 Miles to the Gas Pump” — Annie Proulx

Rancher Croom in handmade boots and filthy hat, that walleyed cattleman, stray hairs like the curling fiddle string ends, that warm-handed, quick-foot dancer on splintery boards or down the cellar stairs to a rack of bottles of his own strange beer, yeasty, cloudy, bursting out in garlands of foam, Rancher Croom at night galloping drunk over the dark plain, turning off at a place he knows to arrive at a canyon brink where he dismounts and looks down on tumbled rock, waits, then steps out, parting the air with his last roar, sleeves surging up, windmill arms, jeans riding over boot tops, but before he hits he rises again to the top of the cliff like a cork in a bucket of milk.

Mrs. Croom on the roof with a saw cutting a hole into the attic where she has not been for twelve years thanks to old Croom's padlocks and warnings, whets to her desire, and the sweat flies as she exchanges the saw for a chisel and hammer until a ragged slab peak is free and she can see inside: just as she thought: the corpses of Mr. Croom's paramours – she recognizes them from their photographs in the paper: MISSING WOMAN – some desiccated as jerky and much the same color, some moldy from lying beneath roof leaks, and, all of them used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels, some bright blue with remnants of paint used on the shutters years ago, one wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee.

When you live a long way out you make your own fun.