

WINTERHATE

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Ice cutting as an industry was dead. The ancient sledges had vanished decades ago, and if any draft horses survived, no one saw or heard them. There were other activities, but the general view, after years of accelerating decline, was stated in the last clergyman's suicide note: Nothing works now.

The remaining citizens could perhaps have migrated elsewhere, but they did not. Where would they go? What would they do? How could they live? No, it was better to stay.

The Inspector had his duties, and The Postmaster, and the teachers, and bar workers. The rendering plant still employed many, although, it was true, for less pay and reduced shifts. It could not replicate its glory days, but it continued, like the town, functioning in diminished capacity. And there were services; the auto and small engine repair workshops, the drug and medical implement stores, the unlicensed plumbers and casual construction workers, the freelance handymen.

Who could say anything could be better anywhere else? Who could know? It would be an individual matter, and who could predict the future of any individual?

A man called The Poet was not a poet. That is, the man never wrote a poem, or, if he did, he certainly never mentioned it to anyone. He was known as The Poet because he had the habit, often after he had been drinking, of declaiming on the past or the future of the town. Frequently these speeches began with the phrase: How disaster befell...

No one took these harangues seriously. While everyone knew, more or less, of the glorious days of ice cutting, the industry had effectively ceased almost ninety years ago, so no one realistically expected its return.

It was more local lore than aspiration.

And increasingly meaningless lore as the ice saws and dioramas had been destroyed several years earlier when the ice museum burned down.

The Inspector hinted at arson, but no one was ever charged.

If, The Inspector said, we condemned every act of fire in this cold, where would we be?

It was true most of the fires were in structures—outbuildings, fish houses—long abandoned, and they brightened the frigid snowy nights almost as decoration or inflamed suggestion of hope.

The Professor sat all day in the tavern with The Poet and the others. The Professor took index cards from the supply closet at the community college. From these, The Professor made a deck embellished with fantastic symbols and figures, but the deck, everyone knew, was a false deck, so no one would meet The Professor's requests for games at large wager.

The Professor was the last of the old professors, so he had little to do. The few students who attended the community college had no interest in old disciplines or rigorous examinations or ideas or bodies of knowledge. No, they went to the dark, unheated college to meet their friends or sleep away the short days or play games on their phones. If they attended classes at all they heard only descriptions of the building itself or the nature of snow from the new professors, who did not mind the students' indifferent inattention.

At the tavern, those with the price of drink idled the days with schnapps and the only brand of beer available, a beer with no name on the label but with, instead, a crude drawing of a deer or stag-like creature. The tavern was decorated with the obligatory stuffed, mounted fish and comic, sentimentalized depictions of bears.

The bear motif was repeated around the town with comic statues and cut-out wooden lawn ornaments and mailboxes, though most had long been buried in the unending snow. At night, real bears wandered the streets searching for garbage or birdseed or any other easy meal.

No one could remember if the bears had attacked humans lately, and no one knew why these bears would not practice hibernation. The general consensus was if one was not an arsonist or poacher, it was best not to be out at night.

The formal transportation system had long since broken down, and the roads were barely passable. Occasionally, battered government surplus trucks or postal vans ran the streets, picking up whoever they could hold and bringing them to the college or tavern or the remaining grocery store. If the driver was fortunate enough to have a plow on his vehicle, he might extort citizens to clear their drives or alleys so The Postmaster, who doubled as the town plow driver, could, to the best of his ability, do a perfunctory job removing snow from the middle of the main streets. Early on people complained, but in time they accepted the situation as they accepted the unheated post office and college and the abandoned town hall and The Inspector's reluctance to investigate any but the most extreme property crimes.

Gangs of scavenging snow cleaners worked the town. Some were thieves; most worked for tips or a bit of food or the price of a stag beer. They stayed occupied and cleared the walks and livened up the town.

There was, of course, always talk. The Postmaster said they'd fucked him on a print campaign and The Professor said you're not the only one and The Poet said I know a song. And there was discussion of the buyer and the buyer's representative.

No one knew who the buyer was. The buyer retained and exercised the buyer's prerogative to remain anonymous until it was no longer necessary or until a deal was finalized and the buyer was legally required to reveal his identity.

The town lay like a half moon along the westerly and northerly curve of the lake. Without ice cutting, its economy, in the best of times, was dominated by rendering in winter and tourism in summer. The tourists came to vacation near the lake to fish or camp in the woods, and the townspeople rented cabins and campsites and sold bait and provisions and guided the fishermen, or, sometimes in fall, the hunters. By common agreement, the rendering plant wound to skeletal shifts during tourist season. One might work at rendering in winter and guide and provision in summer when winters were still short enough and summers long enough to draw. The town, then, was known as a friendly place in the heart of pristine nature and rarely much associated with rendering by anyone not intimately involved with that industry.

Or so it was commonly believed some years before the buyer's representative had come to town. The story, as The Inspector told it, was the buyer was an anonymous billionaire, whose name, were it revealed, would be known to all as that of the great innovative design genius of the age. This buyer was looking for lakeshore property for himself and his elite acolytes and was considering several locations. When the representative came to town, the representative met with local authorities, scrutinized tax and property records, measured lake temperature and water quality, and did myriad other analyses of the town and area environment. The plan, The Inspector confided, was, if the place were personally selected by the buyer, to buy the town, the lake, and hundreds of thousands of acres of surrounding forest. Every property owner would get far more than his property was worth, and those who did not own property, including children, would receive generous stipends to relocate. Then the buyer would raze the town entire and construct a visionary colony of his own design, which would be a model for existence in the shared human future.

There were, however, some confusions in this narrative. No one was certain when the representative had been in town. Was it two years ago or five or ten? And the buyer as visionary billionaire kept shifting in the business media as one visionary replaced the next. And no two townspeople could agree conclusively on the physical description of the representative. Was he tall or short, fat or thin, dark or fair?

There were darker utterances as well. The lake seemed to keep losing water; its level was now the lowest in recorded history. No one could discover the reason for this. Some thought the springs which fed the lake were drying up. Others believed another polity had somehow captured the springs. Still others said the springs, long rumored to be polluted, were now causing a chemical reaction that led to extreme evaporation.

No one had heard from the representative in a long time. Some said any possibility of a sale was long over, while others promised an offer was imminent, asserting the town was nearing the end of the waiting game. The Inspector said he was not at liberty to comment; indeed, he had perhaps already revealed too much.

And then there was inevitably silence as the commentators returned to their stag and schnapps.

This ritual was reenacted several times a week. With the endless cold and near-constant snow, it was, apparently, as good as anything to do. As good, for example, as casual arson or pittance-paid snow removal, though others found other occasional occupation.

A kind of craze swept the town when many of the residents took to yard-grooming, moving the snow in their yards and arranging it in massive piles and berms against what was still considered an inevitable thaw. No one knew who started or even proposed this activity. People made elaborate arrangements, then demolished them to make different elaborate arrangements. Theories of arrangement developed in the tavern. Some held with the parallel method while others espoused the arc method and still others the peaks and valleys. Blocks, then neighborhoods, embraced a method and derided the others. Social pressure and vandalism enforced an area's doctrine. Soon barriers were created, usually of parked vehicles, as ad hoc checkpoints between the competing zones. Ammunition sales increased.

The Inspector knew what was coming and issued a decree: No further yard-grooming was allowed and any checkpoints which were not immediately removed would be dynamited. The town would assume no responsibility for collateral damage, and there would be no financial compensation for damages against any future offers of purchase.

There was a blizzard on the day the decree was issued. On that day and the following day, thirty inches of snow fell.

The decree or its implied financial threat or the new snow or all in combination worked. Snow-grooming ended and the barriers disappeared.

Most of the functionaries now inhabiting roles defined more by title than actual function agreed in the tavern: Futility had solved the problem, and it was equally futile to any more discuss the issue.

A column of volunteers snow-machined out to the freeway to offload a shipment of stag from a stranded truck. This display of civic spirit restored the delicate community balance.

As the lake continued to shrink, the surface ice broke up and fell to the level of the water below and refroze. Several icehouses were destroyed and fishing, even with a house, was impossible. The new surface was all ice hillock and valley, impossible to walk on with no level stretch anywhere. When people investigated this development, something more troubling was discovered. Near the lakeshore, a crevasse had developed.

The Postmaster said the crevasse was obviously related to the shrinking lake, but The Inspector cautioned against any hasty conclusions in the absence of an investigation, and

suggested The Professor study the crevasse. The Professor said that, as an instructor in the Humanities, he was not qualified to do a geological study and that The Geologist at the college had died ten years earlier and had never been replaced. At one time, The Professor said, they might have asked The Chemist, in the absence of The Geologist, to take a look, but The Chemist had died of a drug overdose and been replaced by a series of videotapes called *Chemistry and You*.

The Poet said the problem, like all problems, was a problem of knowledge and for all they knew the crevasse had always been there and the townspeople had simply failed to notice it as their focus on happier times had always been on the lake.

What was needed, The Professor said, was a natural scientist of some type, but who knew where they might find one of these.

Why doesn't The Inspector contact the state, The Postmaster said.

Why don't you contact the Feds, The Inspector said.

Why does it matter? one of the drinkers said. A crevasse is nothing but a hole, and what could a hole do to us?

Live and let live, another drinker said. That's my philosophy.

That's not a philosophy, The Professor said.

It had grown dark.

A loud crash at the front door of the tavern. Scratching sounds.

Bear, The Inspector said. He pulled a heavy revolver from under his coat.

The Publican went to the door. The scratching continued.

Now, The Inspector said.

The Publican flung the door open and leapt out of the way.

The Inspector fired once. Again. And again. The bear lay dead on the tavern's stoop.

Call the butcher, The Inspector said. We'll have chops and sausage. If he can ham a leg or two, that would be good.

When the butcher arrived in a van, a few drinkers loaded the carcass. Each would receive a packet of sausage in return. A quarter would go to The Publican, as was customary. The Inspector took the rest, less the butcher's share.

I could have shot that, The Poet said.

The Professor fell asleep, his head on the bar. He dreamed he lived in a land of pristine snow and constant winter storm.

When The Professor woke and made his way home over the snowy ice, an abandoned house was burning against the night. Smoke thick and black against the black sky, sparks and snowflakes flickering in the fire light.

The fire was unlikely to spread; there was too much snow. Even with plenty of accelerant, it was difficult to bring down an entire house, and mostly the arsonists were left with smoldering remains in the morning.

Since everyone knew the burning house was vacant, there was no attempt to put out the fire.

Let it burn, The Inspector said. It's the same in the forest. Fire clears out the old and makes way for the new.

What if they burn everything? The Poet said.

When it gets serious, The Inspector said, we'll take it seriously. Not before.

That had been months earlier when winter had been going on for several months, and now, after several more months of winter, the arson rate remained steady. The weather was predictable, incessant repetition of cold and snow, subzero every day and night, an unending routine with routine arson and routine bear invasions within it. A routine of neither duty nor surrender.

The Inspector a man of routine. He followed the patterns until the patterns went out of control and were no longer patterns. Then The Inspector took decisive action. But not before. Never prematurely.

There was no percentage in prematurity.

A little arson, a few dead bears, those clergy suicides? Well, the town was not paradise, but it was as close as one might come. Anyone who feared minor disorder did not understand the terror of perfect order.

There was, as The Inspector often said, always time until suddenly there was not. This was the way of the world.

Maybe if they had media, the media could do a story. It was not as though there was dry pavement to collapse on. Maybe a patch of ice, but, obviously, that could not be as welcoming as snow. They—all the townspeople—loved snow at least as much as they hated it.

The Editor's last words, The Poet reported, were *beef jerky*, but it was unclear what The Poet meant. If he meant those were the last words The Editor spoke in the tavern, he might well have been correct, but if he meant they were definitively the last words, the actual last utterance of The Editor, how could The Poet possibly know, as it was generally believed The Editor died alone.

The Poet had some history of questionable reliability. For some months no one saw him, and it was assumed he had wandered off someplace and died. They might, as was typical, find some trace of him, maybe clothing, maybe bones, in the spring. A lot, as the saying went, came out after the melt.

One day, more from habit than from curiosity, The Inspector kicked in the door of The Poet's house and found The Poet, crazed and filthy, beneath a pile of blankets and old newspapers in the front room. The heat had been off for a week, and the room was littered with half-eaten bread and empty cans. The Poet later explained that with the constant creaking and cracking of the house in the cold, he had become convinced he was not in a house at all but aboard a ship somewhere drifting in arctic sea. He thought the food from his pantry the remains of galley stores, and when the heat was cut for nonpayment, he decided, not without reason, he was drifting through some shear, unending gale.

Yeah, The Inspector said, but there's a hole in the story. If you thought you were on a ship, what happened to the crew?

Naturally, The Poet said, I believed they were long since dead and cast over the side. Did I fail to mention I believed the ship to be a ghost ship?

That makes sense, The Professor said. What with the notion of drift and the understocked gallery.

All this seems a little too neat to me, The Inspector said.

We know it well in the Humanities, The Professor said. It is called the logic of the dream.

That doesn't make sense, The Inspector said.

Does this ship story? The Professor said.

I have real work to occupy me, The Inspector said.

The Inspector compiled a lengthy dossier on the last clergyman's suicide, which led him, inexorably, to the earlier suicides, in sequence, of the other clergymen in town. It seemed each had manifested an increasing despair in the face of what may once have been described as the loss of faith, though for clergymen this group was of a decidedly untheological bent. Indeed, it was almost as if none of them ever had much of an idea about anything. It seemed they were mainly preoccupied to the point of near obsession with the continuing orderly function of the town, with a notion that the everyday order and

stratification was eternally continuous and divinely proscribed. Certainly The Inspector could have told them, had they asked, that what they perceived as a fixed order was a nearly accidental contingency, and, even at that, was more illusory than real. Clearly, The Inspector was a man whose element was often violent chaos, but even so, he found the clergy's ideas oddly nostalgic. They expected always that things would work as they believed things always had. Remembering when anyone expected things to work was like remembering some childish dream of living in the perfect carnival. Who could say where that expectation had gone or when it was lost?

Perhaps the clergy had done the right thing. In the sense that, for themselves, they had settled the question. The Inspector knew people with questions of the sort often placed great, entirely irrational, importance on some settlement. They were always burned or burning about something, and that, it seemed, was how they preferred to pursue their lives.

Burned.

About what and how.

And, of course, why.

The Inspector guessed that was the end of it.

This place, The Poet said as he sat drinking in the tavern, was once called The King and Crown. The woman who owned it was called Esmeralda, and she was extraordinarily beautiful.

When was this, The Professor said.

Years ago, The Inspector said. Decades. Many, many long winters past.

And now, The Professor said, it's called Bob's.

No, it's not, The Publican said.

The sign out there, The Professor said.

Says Bob's, The Publican said. But that's just the sign. The sign is left over from when Bob owned it. Now it doesn't have a name.

What happened to Bob, The Poet said.

Killed himself, The Inspector said. Drank battery acid. In the summertime, too.

Speaking of Esmeralda, The Professor said, how come women never come in here anymore?

They left, The Poet said. Remember when, right before the last train out, it was announced it would likely be the last train to leave this winter? They got on it and left.

They did? The Professor said.

You don't remember? The Inspector said. That's not good. All this snow can lead to mental blindness.

I thought it was snow blindness, The Publican said.

That too, The Poet said. It can lead to either or both. Or worse.

That's what happened with Bob, The Postmaster said. He saw devil face in the trees, and in time that was all he could see. That's what finished him.

They get you on that light table, The Poet said.

What? The Inspector said.

Not you, The Poet said, your pictures. Pictures of you, that light from the table streaming through them. All light. The funny thing is there isn't any heat. Not really. It's a kind of cold light they use. Then they see what it is.

Then, The Inspector said, it is too late.

They need to know, The Publican said. For the records and for similar cases in the future.

Remember The Whiskeyman, The Postmaster said.

That old son of a bitch, The Poet said. Haven't thought of him for years.

He sat, The Poet said, right where The Professor sits now, drinking whiskey night and day. Remember when his wife came by and said, If you don't come home, I'm leaving? The Whiskeyman would have none of it. Go, he told her, and she went. The Whiskeyman was planning to build a giant boat he'd bring back and forth across the big lake in all element weather ferrying more and more whiskey to this shore. He had plans, literally drawn out plans, with all sorts of load and displacement and capacity formulas he would check and check again. The Whiskeyman claimed, as well, he had bought a tract, forty acres I think it was, of forest, which, when the time was right, would be clearcut and the timber lumbered right onsite, and from that lumber the mighty ship built, right there. Then it was a matter of bringing it to the water. For some reason, in all this calculation, The Whiskeyman had neglected to buy lakeshore, but no problem was too big for The Whiskeyman. They'd move the boat on rope and rollers and get it to the water to begin his importation business and make his fortune. But there was a flaw, a fatal flaw, in all The Whiskeyman's calculation, and his plan ended no timber, no ship, no plan but a dream or the bitter ash of dream dead in the totality of its failure. The Whiskeyman drank but the one brand of whiskey he planned to import; drank so much of it the threat of shortage forever loomed, and that looming threat the genesis of The Whiskeyman's plan and then failed dream and then near-certain doom. The brand was banned. The authorities in some accident of enforcement actually tested it as they were routinely required to do and had never done. Why they chose suddenly to do this time what they were long required to do is beyond anyone's understanding, but test it they did, and it was half poison, full of some chemical or chemicals clearly demonstrated to cause organic brain degeneration if consumed. They banned the import and confiscated and destroyed all they could find. That was a problem, but, at first, The Whiskeyman consoled himself by imagining he would become a gentleman smuggler with his giant boat, supplying a necessary good to an oppressed and abused group of freedom-loving consumers. But things, as things will, turned for the worst. It turned out no one drank the brand in its native country, for the inhabitants of that northerly state knew it to be poison, and, except for some small domestic sales used primarily for prolonged domestic murders, there was naught but an export market. With the border sealed to that, the brand busted bankrupt and went entirely out of business. No production, no product. That was when, the older among us recall, the bar then known as Bob's moved to the schnapps we honor to this day.

But The Whiskeyman would not be consoled. No brandy, aquavit, nor schnapps would do. Offered other whiskey, he spat with contempt and raved about the times when loyalty meant something. Oh, he for a while hung on with a few bottles of gin a day, but his heart was not in it. The dream of his life was dead. He wandered one day off into the forest, and a season later, a hunter found his bones.

More or less correct, The Inspector said, but I investigated the case and could not confirm the provenance of the bones. They could have been The Whiskeyman, but might as well have been the remains of a drifter or other unfortunate.

Well, The Postmaster said, we got these. Was there a gin bottle near the body?

Couple beer bottles was all, The Inspector said.

Good old stag, The Professor said.

I've never understood, The Publican said, why you call it that.

The deer on the label, The Professor said.

That's not a deer, The Publican said. Look at it. Close. See? It's a unicorn.

Goddamn, The Poet said. I never noticed.

It's not a very good unicorn, The Professor said.

Still, The Publican said, it's no deer at all. There have been deer branded beers, and, for that matter, stag as well. But this is not one of them. At times, moose branded even. In fact, there was once a beer that referenced a deer's horn.

Deer don't have horns, The Professor said. They have antlers. There's a difference.

Now The Whiskeyman thinks he's the devil / But all that evil's in his head / Life is a small bit of small thing / And everyone's dead in the end, The Poet sang.

Remember that one? The Poet said.

No elk, though, The Publican said, curious as it may seem.

Give us another, The Inspector said.

The Poet sang: Now The Editor has the pride of a lion / And lion's pride is a thing to behold / Apart all these tales of long odds / There's somewhere something foretold.

That's the stuff, The Professor said. I'd forgotten all about it. Remember when The Singer was about, belting them out? We had some times then.

The Singer, The Poet said, silent all these years and so near forgotten.

Then a body was discovered.

One of the casual drinkers came in and told The Inspector he was needed.

The Inspector came back an hour later.

Anybody, The Inspector said, know a cat called O'Neil?

O'Nel, The Postmaster said. Used to fix small engines. We handle his mail.

He's dead, The Inspector said. Somebody split his skull. Looks like an ax. Body was over on Main and Third in the snow. Looks like that's where the killing got done. He have any enemies anybody know of?

A few drinkers muttered. Nobody said anything loud or clear.

I didn't know the son of a bitch, The Inspector said. Of course, I might well have recognized him if his skull weren't split. You'd be surprised how disorienting that is—even to a trained professional. Been a long time since we had a good old-fashioned ax murder.

Did you find the ax? The Poet said.

Now what do you think? The Inspector said. Coldest winter in memory, and somebody's going to leave a perfectly good, and apparently sharp, ax in the street? When you can easily clean it in the snow? No, this was done clean and the killer clean away.

So there are no suspects? The Professor said.

I guess, The Inspector said, we could rule out anyone who doesn't have an ax, but everyone in town has at least one ax. Let's not even think about getting down to the hatchet level. Hell, we'd be interviewing scouts. An ax is an implement of opportunity—everyone knows that. The question here is who had opportunity. And motive.

How will you determine that, The Professor said.

Oh, these things have a way of working their ways out, The Inspector said. At least we got to the body before the bears came out. If it weren't for that, we might have a real mess on our hands.

You know, The Poet said, I think O'Nel wrecked a snowblower of mine one time. The carburetor was varnished, and he was supposed to rebuild it, but it never ran right again. When I complained, he told me he'd done the job by the manual just like the manual said, and if I didn't like it, I could do it The Editor's way.

How'd The Editor do it, The Postmaster said.

Isn't that always the question, The Professor said.

The Editor, The Poet said, now I don't know if this is true, remember now, this is according to O'Nel, what The Editor did was The Editor opened up the carburetor and poured raw gas right into it and lit the gas and boom it went but then it was clean as a whisper.

Whistle, The Inspector said.
Where's the body, The Postmaster said.
Don't worry, The Inspector said, we bagged it.
Yes, The Postmaster said. But where?
You know, The Inspector said, we used to use the hospital until those lightning incidents, and you know there's no money for a town morgue.
So he's behind the Post Office?
He'll be moved, The Inspector said, long before thaw. Until then, he's as froze as last year's venison. It's like having a log out there. Long as you don't let anything get at it.
Like I don't have enough to do, The Postmaster said.
Relax, The Inspector said. The bears won't smell him froze, and your real worry, the kids, have all left town.
Why is it again, The Professor said, the bears don't hibernate?
They aren't that sort of bear, The Poet said.
The Inspector drained his glass and slammed it on the bar. I'm supposed, I suppose, to be out on patrol. Little fucking murder and people get anxious. The civilians. Still, I suppose you can't really blame them.
What's the point, The Professor said. The murder's done, and the murderer won't be out there standing around. No one will in this cold.
You could have another drink, The Postmaster said.
No, The Inspector said. It's public duty. That is the point. The public has a right to demand reassurance so the public can rest easy, and that in itself contributes to public order.
What's the last murder before this? The Poet said. I'll be damned if I can remember.
What about that stranger? The Postmaster said.
That's right, The Inspector said. That stranger.
One of the drinkers stood up. Stranger came to town to tell us how to fix this place up. All ideas that one was. Oh, he was going to fix things right. Remember the festival? That's what we were supposed to do: have a fucking festival to welcome the world. Remember? Open the doors to the outside. Remember?
Yeah, The Poet said, but then the doors walked off.
Now, The Publican said, you know as well as I do they didn't walk off right away.
No, The Postmaster said, I'm with our friend here. We had to open them first. Open them to all the world. Promotions—that's what the stranger said he did. Now what in the exact nature of fuck is that? Isn't it something out of the army? I mean, I was never in the army, so how would I even know what promotions were. Yet I was supposed to pay for them. Remember? There was going to be a levy.
That's right, The Poet said. Who was mayor then?
Dead Mayor Jones, the drinker said.
No, The Inspector said. It was Dead Mayor Folge. Dead Mayor Jones was after. The doors were back by then. Those we could recover.
Yeah, The Postmaster said, they found that stranger right outside of town nailed to a door. And then all those doors missing.
We found most of them, The Inspector said, under a tarp out at the college. Probably it was a student prank.
The collection, maybe, The Professor said. The doors themselves were displaced by extreme cold and moisture differentials.
Who says, the drinker said.
The Geologist told me, The Professor said. Remember, he was chair of the science department, so, obviously, he knew what he was talking about.

Did that ever get solved? The Postmaster said.

It was a strange murder, The Inspector said. How much resource do you think we have? Most strangers are killed by drifters anyway. Besides, with Dead Mayor Folge, everything was about holding down taxes. We had no support. We were stretched as thin as we are today, and that was something for those days. I went out and shot a couple drifters and we closed it as even all around.

Seems fair, The Postmaster said.

More than fair, The Professor said.

Time to get back to the game, The Poet said.

The Professor dealt from his false deck. The value of any card was unclear. When a drinker asked, The Professor explained the values corresponded to how long the figure depicted or symbolized had been dead. Also, values were impacted by formulas for the duration and method of death. Any card stating time of open knives was wild; any card marked knives closed compelled immediate play.

Remember, The Poet said, when all those open knives lay in the street?

That was a gimmick, The Inspector said. The sporting goods store had them out to lure the tourists.

How did that work, The Postmaster said.

It didn't, The Inspector said. The store closed not long after.

Not every businessman really understands marketing, The Publican said. It's more than what they think.

They'd scammed off the inventory so by the time it closed there was nothing left of value, The Poet said.

Value has to be part of the equation, The Publican said.

They did not understand, The Postmaster said, what it is like to no longer be of value.

I play, The Professor said, a superstition.

He slammed down his cards.

I play, The Professor said, a trick of lightning.

He scooped up the pot.

The Professor dealt again.

The Whiskeyman, The Dead Editor, The Devil, The Professor said, each to his card.

Life may be a small thing, The Inspector said, but it's a thing.

What one needs to do, The Poet said, is store fuel against the future.

You're in no condition for that, The Postmaster said.

You're in no condition to work, The Poet said. You're in no condition to live.

Now, now, The Professor said. This is a friendly game.

He slapped down a card. I play The Editor for the Dead.

The Editor of the Dead, The Poet said, slapping down a card.

Editor Dead, The Postmaster said, placing his card.

Win goes to me, The Professor said.

Again, The Poet said.

Seems like always, The Postmaster said.

Want a game, invent that game, The Professor said. I am not the first to make this observation. Many of our most successful business leaders have articulated this sentiment, albeit in varied and various terms.

A shot.

The players jumped to their feet.

A drinker held a smoking rifle.

My fault, the drinker said. Kicked her over while I wasn't looking. Makes you wonder where the hell the hammer block is. Then again, she'll do that. She just did.

It's no use, The Inspector said, to tell you to be careful.

No, the drinker said. No use.

There's your theory of prevention, The Inspector said. If I had a case, I'd rest it.

There's no concentrating on the game now, The Postmaster said.

When the guns go off, The Poet said, the game is over.

Or just begun, The Professor said. Funny on the play of Dead Editor. Who knows what would have happened if some one played The Whiskeyman.

Or The Devil, The Poet said.

The Devil might drag us down to hell, The Postmaster said.

Metaphorically, The Professor said.

You don't know what literal means, The Inspector said. On top of everything, we've got this damned body.

The murder, I should think, The Postmaster said, is our concern. Not the inconvenient body.

Show me a convenient one, The Inspector said.

Remember, The Publican said, when they staged that play out at the college?

Yes, The Professor said. It was for the summer festival when we still had summer festival, or, for that matter, summer. Must have been ten, twelve years ago.

Yeah, The Publican said. What was that play called?

It was called, The Professor said, "Death of The Publican."

Yeah, The Publican said. I knew it rang a bell.

It was awful, The Poet said.

Yes, The Postmaster said. Remember it was so bad the town banned plays after that? I wonder if that ban is still in effect.

It is, The Inspector said, until it's repealed, and it has not been repealed.

Well, The Professor said, granted it had its weaknesses. Stock, atrophied figures, underdeveloped, really almost stick figures, moving through the narrative as though crude mechanisms crudely propelled on crude wires.

Yes, The Inspector said, that is exactly the way everything is, though it takes time to see it. You know, I always keep a gun on my desk. A cheap .22 unloaded, it's there casual as a paperweight. Has been for years. And you know, anybody who comes in that office has to pick it up. Every single one picks it up, and then every single one says the same thing: Is this loaded? Why pick it up first? Does it occur to none of them to ask first? It does not. That shows me how they are. Not one, not two, but every goddamn one of them is like that and they are all the same and no amount of unicorn beer is going to change that.

God walked among these travelers; it is said, The Poet said.

Oh yeah? The Postmaster said. How about all the fuckers I've asked to help me who would not?

True, the drinker said, it would not have gone off if it was not loaded, but what use is an unloaded gun?

Sooner or later, The Professor said, these questions devolve to questions of usage, it seems, universally, or if some certain, preordained necessity.

Listen, The Inspector said, they can litter the streets with bodies for all I care. This town owes me a debt, and it is a big debt, and it is a debt long unpaid.

What better debt is there, The Postmaster said, than a debt unpaid?

I thought that was what did you and your ilk in, The Professor said.

Not me, The Postmaster said. My ilk, perhaps. But who can say what one does or does not owe one's ilk?

I'm talking, The Inspector said, about municipal responsibility. Here. Now. In this ice-clogged hellhole.

A drinker came in.

They found another one, the drinker said.

Ax? The Inspector said.

This one, the drinker said, looks to be shot.

There's progress, The Publican said.

More likely accident, The Inspector said. These shootings, it's always the same story. I thought it was a bear trying to get in. Many the relieved widow's solution, these larcenous bears.

The Inspector put on his coat and said, They'll no doubt need me. He left.

I sometimes, The Poet said, feel for our pal there, called out as he is any time of day or night.

Only when there's a body, The Professor said. And that's what—only twice this week so far, and this week's been a busy week.

True enough, The Postmaster said. We all have our occupation—all burdens. You choose something when you're young and believe it to be one thing, but it proves to be something entirely different.

Maybe they should make the rifles better, the drinker said.

If you can't see a unicorn clear, The Publican said, how do you think you can see a shot? Can't be done. Not worth a damn.

We could get to another game, The Professor said.

With that false deck, The Poet said.

Do you have or know a true one? The Professor said. Failing that, we play the false.

They say, a drinker said, they're finding them all over town. The earlier ones axed and now a bunch shot. So who knows? I always thought the bears were bad enough.

They wouldn't have been, The Publican said, if we had gotten together and mounted an aggressive, organized defense.

Wasn't that a line from the play, The Professor said.

So, The Postmaster said, now the unicorn slayer wants an organized effort. Terrify our enemies, eh? Where was all that when they cut my service to the bone and left me a financial cripple to plow roads to keep body and soul?

That was different, The Poet said. You're describing a public sector initiative. The two are hardly comparable.

I don't think that was in the play, The Professor said. Or was it?

Who could know, The Publican said.

It's a rumor, a drinker said, it's true, but I heard those corpses were drained of blood.

No, another drinker said, that's not it at all. What happened was they were all organ-harvested. Find yourself an organ dealer, and you've got the case cracked.

And who, The Publican said, would the organ dealer be dealing organs to?

Why, the drinker said, to the Chinese, of course. Who else?

I thought, The Professor said, the Chinese were selling organs to us. Covertly, you know. Under the table, so to speak.

Put me on your death panel, The Poet sang. I'll see you're not in pain / You'll be gone and buried / Without walking for the rain.

The reign of what? The Postmaster said.

You ought to know, The Publican said.

If I could take my business elsewhere, The Postmaster said.
There is no elsewhere, The Professor said.
Not strictly speaking, The Poet said.
Not at all, The Professor said. Anyway, how many corpses are we talking about?
I heard ten, one drinker said.
I heard fifteen, another drinker said.
Yet we know, The Postmaster said, definitively, from The Inspector, of two.
Ten, fifteen, The Poet said. Town this size, those numbers add up.
Numbers add up regardless, The Professor said.
We need, a drinker said, someone who can tell us truly.
Somebody, The Publican said, who can see clearly what the situation is here. A seer.
Would a sacrifice be in order? The Poet said.
The clergy are dead, The Professor said. Long gone. Some might say rightly so. Now you're free of them, you want a seer? What next, a witchdoctor?
I don't need, a drinker said, some secular humanist dismissal. I have feelings. I deserve better than contempt.
None taken, The Professor said.
Why don't we leave The Inspector to his business and await his report, The Postmaster said. Then we'll know the correct course.
If we'd killed a few dozen bears, The Publican said, none of this would be happening.
This seems like a script, The Poet said. Was this in the play, too?
A script more intentional than legible, The Professor said. That's our friend's mistake. A simple, and self-admittedly belated, call to action answers nothing now.
Answers for nothing, The Postmaster said.
If you wish, The Professor said.
The script was written a long time ago, a drinker said. That Dead Editor wrote it. That's what editors do, write, right?
Technically, they edit, The Professor said. And if we do now have the dead planning our future, I fail to see the way forward in that.
A familiar melody, The Poet sang, Malady of the familiar / Malady is my familiar / Sure as witch flies, I'm still here.
How does he come up with them, The Postmaster said.
Be careful that's all is coming up, The Publican said.
The Professor set his empty glass on the bar and said, Do your duty. Now we're to have witches flying about as though the proposed sacrifice wasn't enough. I suppose there's no doubt a burning somewhere in it.
Haven't we been through all this before? The Poet said. It seems like every winter—
This is worse, a drinker said. Worst winter we ever had and now the bodies are piling up.
That's my point, The Poet said. Every winter we lose a few. Every thaw two or three corpses turn up.
Yeah, the drinker said. But they were snow-buried or ice-bound. These are right on the surface.
And murdered, The Postmaster said. Ax or bullet to the head, well, that's a little different than exposure.
Or a different kind of exposure, The Publican said.
What's that supposed to mean? The Postmaster said.

It means, The Professor said, they were exposed to something different and faster than weather.

Weather, The Postmaster said, can be the fastest thing in the world. Look at tornadoes. Or hurricanes. How about those tsunamis? Nothing quicker than that.

The Inspector came in.

How many, The Postmaster said.

Five so far, The Inspector said. I can't release names.

What's the difference, The Professor said.

It's protocol, The Inspector said. And there's a protocol for a reason.

Which, The Professor said.

I can't reveal that, The Inspector said. To elaborate our protocol would aid those who seek to evade it. This is about security—yours—mine—all of ours.

It's called a civilization, The Poet said.

Something like that, The Inspector said.

What about suspects, The Professor said.

There are some, The Inspector said. Likely more will develop. When we're ready to release information, it will be released. Then, I suppose, it's up to the media.

The Dead Editor, The Professor said.

The Inspector shrugged. It's not like I killed him.

You cannot, The Poet said, measure an absence.

That's not it, The Postmaster said. It's you can't prove a negative.

No, The Publican said. It's something about faith and reason. Which is a matter of which or something.

Put on that jug tune, The Inspector said.

The Poet sang: Now is the time / The Future is gone / You've long left your prime / The death Maiden sings her song.

What's that from? The Professor said.

It's not from anything, The Postmaster said. It's the jug tune. Break open a jug and start to sing. That's what it's from.

Yeah, The Inspector said. Nobody owns it.

Unlike some scrub land, I hear, a drinker said.

What of it, The Poet said. All land has value.

Or had it, The Professor said.

Or will have it, The Postmaster said, if only we can live long enough to see the day.

I'll see it, The Poet said. I'm sure of that. If I hadn't been sure, I wouldn't have bought it. It's a cycle. Value up, value down, value up, and so forth. You ride the cycle and make your move.

Unless you miss your chance, The Postmaster said. Then the cycle's over. Or you're dead.

Or the town is dead, The Professor said. Or the region's played out.

Played out to play again, The Poet said. That's it.

This fucking winter, The Postmaster said.

Seems as though it will never end, The Professor said.

Suppose, The Publican said, we were to run out of fuel.

We won't, The Inspector said.

I said suppose, The Publican said.

We'll burn something else, The Poet said.

Scrub, for example, The Postmaster said.

Or mail, The Poet said. It's all junk anyway. Who needs it?

The question of need, The Professor said. Well, it was bound to arise sooner or later.
It's the winter, The Publican said. It drives people inside their own heads.
It drives them crazy, The Poet said.
That's what I said, The Publican said.
The question of need, The Professor said, and the search for equivalence. The
eternal truths reflected eternally.
Let's not forget, The Postmaster said, we have a killer on the loose.
It's Editor Dead, a drinker said. Anyone can see that.
I doubt, The Inspector said, a dead man is going around killing people.
Happens every day, the drinker said.
How? The Inspector said.
Everything, the drinker said. Everything happens every day.
I think what he means, The Professor said, is if something can happen, it will, given
appropriate variables and sufficient time, happen.
I don't think, The Inspector said, he means anything. I get tired of these blowhards
who can solve any case with a belly of booze and a lung of air.
We're tired, The Poet said, of this winter. All of us. Who knows, maybe the killer,
too.
What do you know about the killer, The Inspector said.
I wasn't saying that, The Poet said.
There is a difference, The Professor said, between a speculation and a fact.
Not all speculations are equal, The Inspector said.
Not all anythings are equal, The Postmaster said.
It depends, The Professor said, on what we mean by the word equal.
An editor could tell us, a drinker said, but the one we had is dead, and, I hear, a
murderer to boot.
To boot, The Professor said, I believe, a bastardization from the French.
You're all bastards, The Poet said. What about the killer?
Do you mean is he a bastard? The Postmaster said.
Of course he's a bastard, The Poet said, but that's not what I'm saying.
It's what you said, The Professor said.
It is not.
A man, The Inspector said, should stand by what he says. Otherwise who can ever
know what to think about anything?
There's two more, a drinker said, coming in from the cold.
Two more killers, The Poet said.
Two more bodies, the drinker said. One has his wrists bound with wire.
That, The Inspector said, is a troubling development. Wire. Hasn't anybody got rope
anymore?
The wire, The Professor said, makes a more—industrial—statement. I believe that is
what the wire is about. I don't think the choice of wire is a mere convenience or necessity.
This is not a class, The Postmaster said.
Does anyone, The Poet said, use baling wire now, or is it a thing of the past?
That, The Professor said, I could not tell you.
The thing to use now, The Inspector said, is plastic cable ties. That is now the
standard.
Somebody who could wire a man's hands must be pretty strong, The Poet said.
Pretty able.
Are you scared, The Postmaster said.

Maybe more than one, The Poet said. Maybe two or more. Could be a pack.
A pack of killers, The Inspector said. Unlikely. Two, maybe. Beyond two the odds go way down. Of course, we can look for tracks. That might tell us something. But the snow's so iced and chopped up, it is unlikely.
You go out there, The Poet said.
And what, The Publican said.
Go out there and just be gone, The Poet said.
Gone, The Professor said.
The final end, The Poet said. The terror of it. The nothing. The none of it. Go out there, and you go out to it in the winternight.
This one's a little slow on the draw, The Inspector said.
I think he's over-thinking this, The Professor said. A bad practice.
Rotten with the drink, if you ask me, The Postmaster said. Puts me in mind of The Dead Editor. Remember? Remember how he used to talk? Said he'd go to see The Doctor of All Souls. Remember? Told me I was mired in illusion. And what was it all? Nothing. Nothing but drink and winter.
It never ends, The Poet said.
It does, The Professor said.
It does at the end, The Inspector said, but you don't know till it's over.
Sure? The Postmaster said.
Sure. The Inspector said.
It seems like a dream, The Publican said.
Which dream is that, The Professor said.
You know, The Postmaster said, that one that keeps coming back.
Yes, The Publican said, that one.
You know what I saw in that dream, The Poet said.
You saw nothing in that dream, The Inspector said.
But—
Enough, The Inspector said. You are demoralizing everyone. And that in a time of crisis. Since when do we all panic simply because there is a killer or killers about?
It's— The Poet said.
It's the winter, The Publican said.
And who can do anything about that, The Professor said. It seems what we are witnessing is a shocking lack of resiliency. I, for one, find this development profoundly troubling.
It's the same thing, The Poet said, over and over and over.
That's it, The Postmaster said, hit him with constant recurrence.
What's next? The Professor said. Regeneration of this and that?
Or, The Inspector said, he wanted to be a sailor, but he could not wear the hat.
There's no song for me, The Publican said, like the old songs. They give a fellow a feeling, a comfort, maybe, of home.
Home, The Postmaster said, now that's another thing.
Each thing, in a sense, is another thing, The Professor said.
Philosophy, The Inspector said.
A drinker came in.
There's three more, the drinker said. Looks like hunting rifles. All shot multiple times.
Can't you ban weapons? The Poet said.

Ban rifles in town, The Inspector said, and leave us defenseless against the bears?
What kind of sense could a measure like that make?

Isn't there something, The Poet said, some bit of cleverness to save us?

It's only a few random slayings, The Postmaster said, keep your head.

Mob-like hysteria will get us nowhere, The Professor said. History clearly demonstrates this. No, the best approach is likely to settle on a method.

I have my methods, The Inspector said. It's only when they're frightened the amateurs begin to speculate. Oh, they know it all when they're terrified.

It's emotion, The Publican said. I've seen this sort of thing before.

What emotion would we not have, The Poet said, and what the one this unending winter leaves us?

I cannot understand a word of it, The Inspector said.

It's guilt, The Professor said. Our friend here knows his behavior is inappropriate, and he cannot overcome the crushing secret knowledge of that guilt. Instead, he blames the winter. Or lashes out at us. These kinds of cases are common and commonly well-documented.

Man is, as we well know, an imperfect animal, The Postmaster said.

It would be crushingly sad if we did not see it in ourselves as well, The Publican said.

How many dead now? The Inspector said. Twenty? Thirty? Fewer than fifty in any case, and we get all this blubber? Thank God there isn't a plague, or who knows what we'd have to listen to.

I can see where this all leads, The Poet said.

Quit pissing in the wind, The Inspector said.

Quit spitting in the fire, The Postmaster said.

Quit drawing on the wall, The Professor said.

Fewer than fifty, The Publican said.

Fifty, The Inspector said. Year like this, we'll lose more down the freeze. Wait till we count up the thaw. Yet I'm to take this as a crisis and further be made responsible for it.

The Poet sang: Man is a tool-making animal / So we were always taught / Now everybody's got a pistol / And I haven't a sot.

The Poet wept.

What is this, The Postmaster said. Really, what became of dignity?

You cannot blame this on the drink, The Publican said.

It is a total collapse, The Professor said. Of course, I know this from The Literature, but I've never actually witnessed it before.

The Poet lunged at The Professor and screamed, Dual card me, you son of a bitch.

The Professor sidestepped. The Poet crashed into the bar.

You'll want to watch that, The Professor said, lest I be forced to take a cleaver to you.

I've seen him do it, The Postmaster said. To that student that time.

It was a former student, The Professor said. Still, that did not entitle him to act disrespectfully.

Accused you of cheating, The Inspector said. Didn't he?

One should not sit at my table if one cannot play cards, The Professor said. Or, for that matter, display some sportsmanship, win or lose.

You taught him a lesson, The Publican said.

It served, The Professor said, as or in place of a bit of theater.

We're starved for entertainment, The Publican said.

It's this winter, a drinker said.

The winter, another drinker offered in toast.
Everyone drank but The Poet.
Is he all right? The Postmaster said.
A bit dazed, I think, The Inspector said.
It's more than that, The Professor said. He has all the symptoms of a mental condition.
He's useless, The Inspector said. A man of no use.
We see, The Professor said, more and more of that. The useless, and, of course, those who have lost their function. Some cannot understand time marches on.
What does that mean, The Postmaster said.
A drinker came in and said, The wind's up. Couple fires on the east side of town.
That wind is harbinger of blizzard, The Inspector said. Heavy snow will put the fire out.
What if it spreads before the snow, The Publican said.
I've addressed the issue, The Inspector said. It is done. That is official.
The ya, ya, ya, ya, The Poet said.
Is he? The Inspector said.
The *y* is pronounced as *j*, The Professor said.
God damn it, The Inspector said.
Jeh jeh jeh jeh, The Poet said.
The Professor walked quickly to the toilet, went in, came out with a shotgun.
You better quit that, The Inspector said as he drew his pistol.
Gag ga ga, go, The Poet said.
The Inspector shot The Poet. The Professor shot The Publican and the drinkers.
The Postmaster ran for the door; The Inspector shot him in the back.
And it came to me, The Professor said, they were monsters all surrounded me, even those I loved in this land of freeze and ignorance.
The Postmaster groaned.
Did you not think we knew everything? The Inspector said. He shot The Postmaster again.
And now— The Professor said.
We burn it all, The Inspector said.
And the woods?
And the woods.

