

# The Half-Skinned Steer



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANNIE PROULX

Edna Anne Proulx, often referred to as Annie Proulx, grew up as one of five sisters in various states around America. She graduated high school in Maine and enrolled at Colby College, but dropped out two years later to marry her first of three husbands. She returned to college in 1963 to get her bachelor's degree in history at the University of Vermont, and then went on to get a master's degree from Sir George Williams University (now known as Concordia University) in Canada. Proulx eventually moved to Vermont and became a writer and journalist, writing various articles for *Gray's Sporting Journal*, an outdoorsman magazine, and nonfiction titles such as dairy and hard cider cookbooks. She also founded a small-town newspaper in Vermont called *The Vershire Behind the Times*. In 1988, she published a collection of short stories, *Heart Songs, and Other Stories*, and in 1992, published her first novel, *Postcards*, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Her next novel, *The Shipping News* (1993) won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She moved to Wyoming in 1994, and then published another novel, titled *Accordion Crimes* in 1996. She thereafter produced another short story collection, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, in 1999. *Close Range* features the O. Henry Award-winning story "Brokeback Mountain."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mero Corn claims he left Wyoming in 1936. In this period of American history, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl brought widespread economic and ecological hardship. The Corns' land is unproductive and barren, similar to regions suffering from the fallout of the Dust Bowl (the name given to a period of severe droughts and dust storms). Additionally, when he first left home, Mero performed various odd jobs; his lack of financial stability is characteristic of the Depression era, a period of economic instability and decline in the 1930s. Lastly, Mero claims he became a soldier after leaving home. He likely participated in World War II, which began in 1939.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Close Range* is the first collection in Proulx's trilogy of stories about Wyoming; it is followed by *Bad Dirt* (2004) and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008). In the Acknowledgements section of *Close Range*, Proulx writes that "The Half-Skinned Steer" was inspired by an Icelandic folktale titled "Porgeir's Bull," also known as "Thorgeir's Bull." In that story, a man summons a ghostly, gruesome bull to torment a woman who has rejected his

romantic advances; the bull then haunts other people who mistreat its creator. Proulx's version of the tale may have been further inspired by a version contained in *The Icelanders* (1981), a book which features stories of Icelandic-Canadian folklore and history. Additionally, in the 1990s, a non-profit organization called the Nature Conservancy invited various writers to visit its sites and create short stories inspired by their trips. These short stories became an anthology called *Off the Beaten Path: Stories of Place*; this collection includes Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer."

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Half-Skinned Steer
- **When Written:** 1997
- **Where Written:** In Wyoming, inspired by a visit to the Nature Conservancy's Ten Sleep Preserve.
- **When Published:** November 1997
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** The story, which involves a road trip from Massachusetts to Wyoming, takes place in numerous locales, including a ranch near the Big Horns mountain range in Wyoming, and another ranch in Dubois, Wyoming.
- **Climax:** As Mero gets stuck in a snowstorm on his drive home, he sees the half-skinned steer from Tin Head's story, and realizes that he has been cursed by the same misfortune.
- **Antagonist:** Nature
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Big Horns.** The Corn family ranch is located to the south of "Big Horns," otherwise known as the Bighorn Mountains. These mountains are close to the Tensleep Preserve, which Proulx visited on invitation from the Nature Conservancy; her visit inspired the story's creation.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Mero Corn takes pride in the fact that he "never" returned to visit his family after leaving his home in Wyoming decades earlier. One day, however, he is "summoned" back to Wyoming by Louise Corn, his brother Rollo's daughter-in-law, who tells him over the phone that Rollo has passed away. Louise informs Mero that an emu attacked and killed Rollo on the family's **ranch**, which currently operates as a tourist destination called "Down Under Wyoming." Mero decides to return home for the

first time in sixty years.

During the drive back to the ranch, Mero recalls formative scenes from his childhood. He describes how it was “impossible” to “run cows” on the ranch, as it was a hostile landscape; he also recalls how his father, whom he refers to as the old man, defected from the cattleman lifestyle to become a mailman. Additionally, he reminisces about his father’s girlfriend, comparing her to a **horse** with sexualized, graphic language. Mero remembers how the girlfriend’s flirtations with both Rollo and his father “charged” the family with “intensity of purpose” and added tension to an otherwise tedious existence. One of the girlfriend’s stories, an ominous tale about a man named Tin Head, is a key memory from Mero’s childhood.

Mero recounts various fragments from the girlfriend’s story of Tin Head as he continues his trip. In the tale, Tin Head and his family were particularly unlucky: his chickens would turn mysteriously blue, and his cattle were often born mutated. At the time, the girlfriend’s story resulted in a sexual yet terrifying dream for Mero; he remembers how, upon waking, he realized his life could continue monotonously “like this for some time.” This realization, combined with Mero’s desire for a girlfriend “of his own,” prompts him to leave home and make a new life.

As Mero reminisces about the past, he starts disengaging from the present. When he is pulled over by a cop, for example, he momentarily forgets why he is traveling home. Mero then relates another formative moment in his youth: his sexual awakening. He recalls how an anthropologist showed him cliff paintings, and how he mistook an image of female genitalia for a horseshoe.

After recounting this memory, Mero gets into a multi-car crash; he then buys a secondhand car and continues his drive homeward. He drives through Cheyenne “for the second time in sixty years,” and recalls how, when he first left home, he stopped at a restaurant to order a **bloody steak**. The gory meal repulsed him, however, and he converted to vegetarianism. Mero considers this the path of a “cattleman gone wrong,” and is proud of his decision to distance himself from his family’s traditions.

Continuing with the theme of gruesome imagery, Mero recounts the next part of Tin Head’s story. In the tale, Tin Head selects a steer to butcher “every year” to help feed his family “all winter long.” One year, however, Tin Head leaves the steer “half-skinned” and bloodied on the ground; he forgets to finish the work, as he is absentmindedly distracted by his wife’s call to dinner.

Mero then interrupts the story to describe the natural landscape of Wyoming, noting how the blinding snow and whipping wind rises and stops, and the road clears in front of him. As he drives onward, he mentally recalls the shape of his family’s ranch, and reminisces about the “intimate fences” he had constructed in his youth. The storm begins to surge again,

and Mero focuses on “keeping to the road,” affirming that he has not “forgotten how to drive a winter mountain.” He claims that the road is “achingly familiar” even in the snow, and recalls the neighboring ranches with fondness. Despite Mero’s confidence in his directions, however, he misses the turnoff to his family’s ranch. One of his car’s tires then gets stuck in the snow; he gets out of the car, hoping he can extricate it.

The tale of Tin Head resumes. Mero’s father’s girlfriend describes how Tin Head emerges from his home after dinner to look for the **half-skinned steer** and is surprised to see it is gone. Suddenly, Tin Head notices movement in the distance, and realizes it is the steer, which is still alive. Tin Head sees the hate in the steer’s eyes, and realizes that he and his family are cursed to suffer for cruelly injuring the steer.

Tin Head’s story concludes, and Mero is still stuck in the snowstorm. He looks through his car’s window and realizes that he left the keys in the ignition. He decides to break one of the windows to retrieve them. He then places the car’s floor mats under the tire to lend it traction, and gets into his battered car to start the engine. The mats barely help, and the tires spin uselessly in the snow before giving out entirely.

Mero gets out of the inoperative car to finish the journey on foot. He acknowledges that he will likely die in the storm, and claims that this is a “relief.” Mero trudges through the snow, marveling at the “violent country,” and realizes that one cow has broken away from its herd to follow him. He turns to look at the animal and recognizes it as the half-skinned steer, whose “red eye had been watching for him all this time.”



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Mero Corn** – Mero Corn, the protagonist of the story, left his childhood home in Wyoming in 1936 and returns for the first time in sixty years to attend the funeral of his brother, Rollo. Mero, a self-made man, is satisfied with the trajectory of his life: he went to war, married three times, held various jobs, and even got into local politics when he moved to Massachusetts. Mero believes his escape from the **ranch**, which allowed him to leave the natural world behind, was the correct decision; he never came back to visit his family, and implies that he does not even know when his father passed away. As Mero drives home for Rollo’s funeral, however, his vivid childhood memories illustrate how his life has been profoundly impacted by his upbringing. In particular, the relationship between his father, his father’s girlfriend, and Rollo affected him deeply: in his youth, Mero remembers how Rollo lusted after his father’s girlfriend, and how this repulsed Mero; part of the reason Mero left the ranch was to escape both the tedium and his family’s amorous tension. As Mero continues to get lost in his memories, he begins to act recklessly: he gets into a car crash

and ends up lost in a snowstorm. Mero then attempts to walk home, but gets stuck in the storm before he reaches the ranch, and thus does not complete his homecoming. As he accepts his imminent death, he imagines he sees a **half-skinned steer**? an omen from a childhood story? and realizes that he never truly escaped from the ranch or from nature's wrath.

**Rollo Corn** – Rollo is Mero Corn's younger brother. According to Mero's memories, Rollo coveted and lusted after their father's girlfriend, who often entertained the men in the **ranch**'s kitchen by telling stories. As Mero never returned to visit Rollo, Rollo's relationship with the girlfriend is left ambiguous; he did, however, father a child named Tick Corn. It is revealed that Rollo sold the family's ranch to the Girl Scouts; the Girl Scouts then sold the ranch to a neighboring family, who afterwards passed it along to an Australian businessman. The businessman established the ranch as a tourist destination, "Down Under Wyoming," which showcased imported animals, such as emus. Rollo eventually took the business over from the Australian. Rollo is killed by one of the emus, and his death compels Mero to return home. Like Mero, Rollo has a complicated, fatal relationship with nature: Rollo is killed by an animal, and Mero gets fatally trapped in a snowstorm.

**Mero's Father/Old Man** – Mero Corn refers to his father as his old man. Although the old man goes unnamed, he is an influential figure in Mero and Rollo's lives. In Mero's opinion, the old man was an alcoholic and disappointing role model: he gave up ranching to become a mailman, a choice that Rollo and Mero saw as a betrayal. Mero remembers his father as a scarred, drunken man, and vividly recalls the old man sitting at the kitchen table guzzling Everclear as he listened to his girlfriend's stories. Mero believes both Rollo and the old man lusted after her simultaneously, but Mero also frequently describes her in his memories with sexualized language and physically compares her to a **horse**. His father and brother's mutual infatuation disgusted Mero, and propelled him to escape the **ranch** and make a different life for himself.

**The Girlfriend** – Mero Corn vividly remembers his father's girlfriend, who used to tell stories with her mesmerizing voice. Mero recalls how the girlfriend told the Corn men about the story of Tin Head, a rancher who slaughters a steer but disrespects the animal's sacrifice and is cursed for his insolence. The girlfriend's telling of Tin Head's story fascinates Mero, and the tale remains in his memory sixty years later. Mero characterizes the girlfriend as a liar and a flirt, as she revealed in both Rollo and his father's attention. Mero also describes her as **horse-like**, and believes the girlfriend's treatment of his brother and father prompted him to leave home: he was unwilling to compete for her attention, and escaped the **ranch** to find a woman of his own.

**Tin Head** – Tin Head is an ill-fated character in a story told by the old man's girlfriend. Tin Head is plagued by misfortune: due to an injury, he has a metal plate embedded in his skull, and the

animals on his paltry ranch continually suffer bizarre mutations. In the girlfriend's story, Tin Head slaughters steers to keep his family fed; one year, however, he kills and begins skinning the animal, but leaves the job unfinished. When he finally remembers that he needs to finish skinning the animal, he sees that the steer is gone. When he eventually locates it, he realizes that the **half-skinned steer** is still alive. The steer looks at him with hatred, and Tin Head realizes that he and his family are doomed; he angered and provoked nature by disrespecting the steer's sacrifice, and must suffer for his mistake. Tin Head's tale frames Mero's life story, illustrating the ongoing thematic tension between man and nature.

**The Anthropologist** – The anthropologist is an unnamed character from Mero Corn's childhood; the old man once instructed the anthropologist to show Mero some hillside paintings. The anthropologist discussed various paintings of animals with Mero before pointing out how one set of images depicted female genitalia. In his innocence, Mero initially believed the drawings depicted **horse**-related symbols, continuing the thematic connection between sexuality and equine imagery. This conversation with the anthropologist provides insight into Mero's burgeoning sexuality, a key motivation for his eventual departure from the **ranch**.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Louise Corn** – Louise Corn is the wife of Rollo's son, Tick Corn. Louise calls Mero to inform him of his brother's death.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### HOMECOMING

In "The Half-Skinned Steer," the elderly Mero Corn returns home to his family's **ranch** to attend his brother Rollo's funeral. While driving from Massachusetts to Wyoming, Mero recalls past events that compelled him to leave home as a young man. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that Mero didn't escape completely; his choices and memories have kept him tethered to home, a place that has exerted its influence over his entire life. Mero never reaches home in the story—the story suggests that Mero dies while trudging through a snowstorm. The story thus concludes, somewhat ironically, on a note of unfinished homecoming. In the end, Mero cannot return to the place he has for six decades defined his life against. In Proulx's story, the idea of "homecoming" thus proves elusive, even as home itself

is presented as having an inexorable influence over an individual's identity.

Proulx begins the story by describing Mero's reasons for leaving home in his twenties. Mero rode "the train out" of Wyoming and never returned because he believed that the ranch would not provide any meaningful opportunities, and this pushed him to look for a new life elsewhere. Mero also "pulled away" when his father's girlfriend arrived and his brother Rollo fell for her charms. Mero was repulsed by his brother and father's mutual infatuation with the woman, and realized that staying on the ranch would mean his life would "go on" monotonously?to Mero, then, the ranch was a place of claustrophobic tedium. Based on these rationales, Mero left the ranch to "find" new "territory." He went to war, married multiple times, and worked odd jobs. He retired briefly before getting into "local politics," another role he eventually left. Mero's initial escape has seemingly turned into a lifelong cycle of avoidance. One could read Mero's need for escapism, exemplified by the constant changes to his career and marital status, as the inevitable consequence of a pattern started by his initial departure from the ranch.

Mero is proud to have escaped from his past, yet his identity seems to have been formed in direct rebellion to his upbringing—indicating that he never *really* escaped his home's influence. For example, Mero recalls how the sight of a **bloody steak** in a restaurant repulsed him and prompted him to become a vegetarian. Recognizing that this choice is particularly unusual as he grew up on a ranch, Mero describes himself as a "cattleman" who has "gone wrong." Mero emphasizes proudly that his vegetarianism contradicts his upbringing, ironically illustrating that he still thinks and cares deeply about his roots. In fact, Mero believes his choices make him superior to his family. When Mero hears that an emu has killed his brother, he emphasizes how he "could have" escaped the emu's attack, and credits his likely escape to the time spent on his "Exercycle" and to a diet of "green leafy vegetables." Mero claims his healthy lifestyle?a clear reaction to, and departure from, the life he would have led as a meat-eating or alcoholic cattleman?makes him a more capable man than his brother.

As Mero approaches the ranch, memories of home overwhelm him, indicating their hold on his identity even after decades away. He describes how "the shape of the ranch" awakens "in his mind," and how he "could recall" the various objects he built for the ranch with his own hands. Mero clearly still feels a sense of ownership, despite his insistence that he has escaped the ranch for a new life. He highlights the "eerie dream quality" of the situation, acknowledging how the ranch has remained a strangely potent place for him. In fact, the ranch seems "clear and sharp in his mind."

At the same time, however, Mero knows the ranch cannot possibly be the same as when he left it: the ranch has changed

ownership and shifted business models in his absence, and the home he remembers no longer exists. When he considers the idea of stopping at "Banner's place," for example, he realizes that Bob Banner "would have to be 120 years old" to greet him now; the neighbor he knew in childhood has passed away, changing his home's context. As such, Mero cannot truly return home, as the place he remembers has transformed in his absence. With his brother also dead, the potential for closure has passed. Mero's feelings of familiarity reveal his belief that some basic essence of home remains, but the fact that he fails to find the ranch at all suggests he is mistaken.

Mero continues to drive homeward, but the engine of his car cuts out, and Mero understands that he is likely going to die. He claims that it is "almost a relief" to have "reached this point," and seems happy that he never truly returned to the ranch, joking to himself that he may instead "find the mythical Grand Hotel." Mero acknowledges that he will never complete his homecoming; he is content to remain trapped both physically and figuratively in a sort of limbo between two worlds, as he never truly left home yet is unable to return. Home is ultimately a complicated and rather paradoxical concept in the story. It is both an indelible part of an individual's character and a concept that largely exists only in one's mind.



## MEMORY AND THE PAST

Proulx's story is told largely via flashback, as Mero recalls various childhood memories during his drive home to attend his brother Rollo's funeral. This suggests that Mero is a character more emotionally focused on the past than on the present. As Mero continues to fixate on people and places from long ago, however, his memories prove unreliable, and he ultimately places himself in dangerous situations that result in his probable death. In Proulx's story, history perilously overshadows the present: emotional memories become more important than current circumstances, illustrating the danger of living in one's past.

On his drive homeward, Mero reminisces about his family's dynamics, fixating on his judgments of his relatives. Mero relies on his past opinions to shape his perspective, as he has no other source of insight into his relatives' personalities. For example, Mero discusses how, in his childhood, his father got a job as a mailman, leading him to resent the old man for this "defection" from ranching. Mero recalls how his father "looked guilty" as he delivered mail, and also remembers his father's constant drinking. Mero never saw past these paternal failures, and flippantly claims his old man "must be dead fifty years or more," indicating that he does not know when his father died. Mero's past opinion of his father pre-empted any reconnection; he was satisfied with his initial opinion, and never attempted to amend it.

Mero also reminisces about the interactions between his father, his father's girlfriend, and Rollo. At the time, although

she was his father's girlfriend, she "played" the entire family "like a deck of cards." Mero's memory highlights how she "charged" the men with an "intensity of purpose," and provided a source of tension. Despite the fact that these interactions happened decades ago, Mero still relies on these memories to understand his family's emotional dynamic. Mero then claims he never came to visit because he did not want to see his family "bankrupt and ruined." Mero is assured of his family's misfortune, even though he never came back to see it himself; he blindly trusts his former judgment of his family's situation, and his pride denies people the potential for change or growth.

Mero's memories often help him justify and compartmentalize his life decisions. As he explains how his past has led him to his current circumstances, however, he begins to disregard the dangers of the present. In one scene, Mero recalls a past motivation for his departure from the **ranch**: after viewing the complicated dynamics between his father, brother, and his father's girlfriend, he realized his life was not likely to change. Mero recalls watching his brother covet his old man's girlfriend?whom Mero himself described with sexual language, comparing her to a robust **horse**?and chooses to leave, as he wants to find his own "territory." Immediately after recalling this memory, Mero is pulled over by a cop who asks him "where he was going." Mero admits that he momentarily forgot "what he was doing there." Mero, lost in memories that are foundational to his past, briefly cannot remember why he is returning home.

As Mero gets closer to the ranch, his long-term memories overtake his short-term memory. Despite being able to recall the intricacies of his family's relationships, Mero forgets which ramp to use on the highway, and tries to use a hotel sign as a landmark but ends up on the "wrong side" of the interstate. When he finds the correct entrance ramp, he drives recklessly, which triggers a multicar pile-up. Mero remembers the past with clarity, but his memories distract him, and he becomes a more absent-minded and thoughtless driver in the present. This again underscores the peril of living in the past.

Mero's reliance on memory continues to lead him into danger; eventually, despite his belief that he knows the ranch, his misjudgment results in his probable death. As Mero nears home, he realizes he does not "recognize" the "turnoff to the ranch," despite his claims that he can visualize it in his mind. He turns into what he believes is the right entrance, but as the road gets "rougher" and he realizes that he is wrong. Despite Mero's ability to recall his youth with precise detail, he relies too heavily on inaccurate memories and gets lost. Mero's car then gets stuck in the snow, and he wonders if he can wait out the storm and head to his neighbor's house in the morning for help. He then remembers his neighbor is long dead, another clear slippage in his memory. Mero finally admits that the "map of the ranch in his memory" is "obliterated," and acknowledges that he was over-reliant on his memories of home, which are

clearly outdated.

Mero gets out of the car to try and extricate the stuck tire. When he grabs the "car door handle" to get back inside, however, he realizes that he forgot "the keys in the ignition." He smashes a rock through the window to retrieve them, and then sees the "passenger door" was unlocked the whole time. This indicates that his decision-making abilities are clearly addled. The car's engine dies, and Mero realizes that he is fatally trapped in the storm. His situation is a direct consequence of his failing recall; his overconfidence in his memories, which were dangerously inaccurate, lead him into mortal danger.

In Proulx's story, Mero reminisces about childhood, revealing that his past impressions have remained untested in his old age. Mero's fixation with his memories prevents him from moving on: he continues to get lost in his past to the point that he loses contact with his current circumstances. Proulx's story thus illustrates how living in the past is a hindrance to one's present: when one is consumed by their memories, they become increasingly disengaged from their actual, ongoing existence.



## MAN VS. NATURE

"The Half-Skinned Steer" contains various moments that illustrate nature's hostile relationship with human beings. The story is

framed around an ominous fairytale about a man named Tin Head, whose family is cursed as a result of his disrespectful treatment of nature. Tin Head's story parallels the history of the Corn family, which owns a **ranch** plagued by misfortune. The Corns' lack of respect for and misunderstanding of nature results in the family's ongoing bad luck; they are fated to suffer economic hardship, emotional strife, and even death. Proulx's story, which ends with Mero likely dying in a snowstorm, presents nature as a merciless and indifferent force against which humanity is inevitably powerless.

Mero's father's girlfriend introduces the story of Tin Head, which illustrates a perpetual conflict between man and nature. On Tin Head's ranch, nature acts cruelly and atypically, resulting in Tin Head's unnaturally bad luck: his chickens change "color overnight," and his cows' calves are often born with three legs. Tin Head's ranch, which is unduly affected by nature, has been singled out for bizarre misfortunes. Despite this contentious relationship between Tin Head and nature, however, Tin Head's family relies on the resources provided by his steers, which he butchers for food. One year, however, Tin Head forgets to honor the gravity of the steer's sacrifice; instead, he acts disrespectfully, and begins skinning a steer only to finish the job "halfway." Rather than completing the work, he "leaves the steer half-skinned," a clear sign of contempt for nature.

Tin Head's decision to leave the steer's slaughter unfinished dooms his family. When he goes back outside, he sees the **half-**

skinned steer's "red eyes" looking at him with "pure teetotal hate." He realizes that "he is done for" and that his entire family is now fated to suffer; his disrespect for nature has started a cycle of revenge. He acknowledges that even his house will have to "blow away or burn up," as nature is merciless and vengeful. The tale of Tin Head's family acts as context for Mero's story, and illustrates how the natural world is fated to clash with humans.

The Corn family's ranch, like Tin Head's ranch, is plagued by bad luck. It is "impossible to run cows" on the "tough" land, and the cows tend to fall "off cliffs" or "into sinkholes." Even the conditions for growing the basic materials for ranching are unfriendly: hay cannot thrive, though less useful varieties of plants grow in abundance. The ranch's land seems unwilling to sustain any of the Corn family's members. This bad luck is exacerbated by the Corn family's inability to understand or work peacefully with nature. Instead of adapting to the ranch's natural resources, the family decides to exchange their cattle for emus—an animal nonnative to Wyoming. They thereby turn the ranch into a tourist destination, with imported animals that do not belong in the ranch's habitat. This choice illustrates the Corn family's disregard for nature: they are unwilling to acclimate, and instead choose to introduce new and unnatural elements. Mero's brother Rollo is later killed by one of the imported emus, which attack him unexpectedly. Rollo's death is directly caused by the Corn family's doomed relationship with nature: the family provoked nature by introducing non-native species to their ranch, and one of the animals lashes out at—and eventually kills—Rollo.

The hostile relationship between nature and the Corn family also impacts Mero's life, despite his attempts to escape his fate. Throughout his life, Mero has deliberately separated himself from the natural world of the ranch. He left home to work in more industrial jobs and became a vegetarian, which he considers the choice of "a cattleman gone wrong." Furthermore, he admits to knowing about nature solely through the "programs on television," a clear divergence from his family members, who learn about nature through ranching. Mero believes these choices in his youth, which kept him from being a proper "cattleman," allow him to be ignorant of nature and the natural world. Eventually, however, Mero's return to the ranch places him back into a hostile relationship with the natural world. When he drives to the ranch for his brother's funeral, he is caught in a snowstorm. Mero describes how the wind seems to fight him, and how the snow continues to fall in spite of his distress; he begins to realize that the "thread" of his life is about to end. Despite his greatest efforts to escape nature's curse, Mero once again becomes subject to the cruelty of the natural world.

Mero begins to walk towards the ranch, buffeted by the snowstorm. He describes how he sees an animal appear next to him, and he suddenly realizes it is the "half-skinned steer," the

omen from Tin Head's fairytale, which has been "watching for him" his entire life. This steer illustrates nature's inexorable power. Despite believing he has escaped the natural world's mistreatment of his family, Mero recognizes, in the moments before his death, that he has not escaped fate. Ultimately, he cannot break nature's curse; it has been waiting for him to return.

In Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer," nature has an antagonistic relationship with humanity. Compounding this tense dynamic, many of Proulx's characters continually disrespect nature as they struggle to survive; as a result, nature places a curse on them for their contempt. Individuals are thus fated or doomed to suffer when they mistreat nature, and cannot hide from nature's ability to enact revenge.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE RANCH

The ranch is the childhood home of Mero Corn and his brother Rollo, and it is depicted as a hostile and unforgiving place. Throughout the story, it becomes a symbol of the inescapability of the past as well as of the futility of man's attempt to control nature. The ranch is incapable of growing resources to support livestock, and farm animals often go missing or die in unusual ways on it. The Corn family's fate is entwined with the ranch, despite the Corns' many attempts to rid themselves of the property: they give it to the Girls Scouts, who then sell it to an Australian businessman. Eventually, however, the ranch returns to the Corn family, and Rollo ends up running half of the property. The ranch's fluctuating ownership—and eventual return to the Corn family—illustrates a home's paradoxical ability to be both permanent and mutable. Back in Rollo's hands, the ranch serves as a tourist attraction; it features animals like emus that are foreign to Wyoming. In working with these non-native species, the Corns demonstrate their lack of respect and understanding for nature: they are unable and unwilling to adapt to the terrain. Eventually, Rollo suffers for this disrespect when he is killed by one of the emus. The ranch's ongoing malevolence towards its owners and visitors, which is exacerbated by the Corns' disrespect for the natural world, illustrates the tense dynamic between man and nature. In addition, Mero returns home and presumably dies in a snowstorm before reaching the ranch. For the Corns, their ranch home is a place of fated, inescapable misfortune.



### THE HALF-SKINNED STEER

The titular half-skinned steer is a manifestation of

nature's wrath, and its bloody, gruesome appearance represents the violent relationship that exists between man and the natural world. The steer is an omen from a fairytale narrated by the girlfriend of Mero's father, in which a rancher named Tin Head slaughters the steer for food but does not finish skinning the animal due to absentmindedness and a lack of respect for nature. When he eventually remembers to finish the job, however, the steer has disappeared. He locates it soon after, and realizes it is still alive; moreover, looking into its hate-filled eyes, he realizes the steer blames him for its current pain and suffering. The steer, which haunts various characters in the story, also serves as a warning: like Tin Head, characters that disrespect nature are doomed to be punished for their insolence. The half-skinned steer is even able to enact revenge on Mero, who attempted to escape the natural world for decades by leaving his home. Although Mero believes he has eluded nature's reach by making a life away from his **ranch**, he is reminded upon his return that the steer, an omen of revenge, has been waiting for his arrival.



## HORSES

To Mero, horses are representative of sexual, animalistic passion, and their wild, untamable nature evokes fantasies of escape and conquest. When Mero remembers his father's girlfriend, he often describes her as horse-like, and her stories prompt his dreams of horse breeding and sexual violence. Additionally, in his youth, Mero studied cliff paintings with an anthropologist, and remembers how he originally believed a painting of female genitalia looked like a horseshoe. Horses are illustrative of Mero's formative desire for his own partner; Mero's sexuality, often expressed with equine imagery, is a driving force that prompts him to leave home at a young age. Though Mero believes that multiple factors prompted him to leave the **ranch**, such as the tedium of ranching and the nonexistence of compelling career options, he also admits that one of the main motives behind his departure was a lack of romantic opportunity. Moreover, Mero's repeated references to horses also speak to how natural imagery pervades all aspects of his life, despite his desire to escape the natural world.



## BLOODY STEAK

Mero Corn leaves his childhood home to make his fortune as a soldier, salesman, and politician; he is uninterested in being a cattleman on his family's **ranch**. When he travels out of Wyoming, he stops at a restaurant for a steak, but is nauseated by the sight of the bloody meat. From that moment onwards, Mero chooses to become a vegetarian, an incongruous choice for a man who raised cattle in his youth. To Mero, the bloody steak embodies the limited, grim existence he has left behind on the ranch; by forgoing meat, Mero frees

himself from his cattleman identity, and makes a new living for himself away from Wyoming. Additionally, the bloody steak echoes the gruesome imagery of the **half-skinned steer**: both are pieces of nature that have been damaged by man. As such, they embody—and are the result of—the violent, survivalist dynamic between humans and the natural world.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* published in 1999.

### The Half-Skinned Steer Quotes

☛ Mero had kicked down thoughts of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns. He'd got himself out of there in 1936, had gone to a war and come back, married and married again (and again), made money in boilers and air-duct cleaning and smart investments, retired, got into local politics and out again without scandal, never circled back to see the old man and Rollo bankrupt and ruined because he knew they were.

**Related Characters:** Mero's Father/Old Man, Rollo Corn, Mero Corn

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, protagonist Mero Corn is introduced as a character who has “kicked down” or repressed thoughts of his childhood home, a ranch in Wyoming, for much of his life. This description reveals the complex relationship Mero has with the ranch: he is unwilling to address thoughts of home, choosing instead to avoid them entirely. Additionally, this passage highlights how Mero's home was built on “strange ground,” which hints at the ranch's ominous and hostile characteristics.

For Mero, the ranch was a departure point: he left in his youth, “never” returned to see his family, and believes that he was smart to escape. In comparison, he thinks his brother Rollo and his father are merely “bankrupt and ruined.” Despite this, Mero's varied career path indicates that his own life has been a series of repeated escapes; his initial exit from the ranch starts a cycle of avoidance that he does not acknowledge. Additionally, Mero's decision to

leave home influences his self-worth, and makes him believe he is superior to his relatives who stayed behind. As Mero “never circled” home, however, his belief in his father and brother’s ruination is unfounded: he cannot know whether his relatives’ life choices led to bankruptcy. Mero’s escape as allowed him to remain ignorant to his family’s fate, and this ignorance allows his sense of superiority to remain unchallenged.

They called it a ranch and it had been, but one day the old man said it was impossible to run cows in such tough country where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sinkholes ... where hay couldn’t grow but leafy spurge and Canada thistle threw ... The old man wangled a job delivering mail, but looked guilty fumbling bills into his neighbors’ mailboxes.

Mero and Rollo saw the mail route as a defection from the work of the ranch, work that fell on them.

**Related Characters:** Mero’s Father/Old Man, Rollo Corn, Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage quickly establishes the ranch as a place of hostile and unfriendly conditions, and introduces a tense and antagonistic relationship between man and nature. The ranch refuses to sustain the Corn family, and actively thwarts Mero and Rollo’s efforts to tame it: cattle mysteriously disappear or die, and even the bare materials of ranching—hay for feeding—cannot grow on the land. As a result, Mero’s father decides to change careers. This decision lessens the sons’ respect for their father, adding emotional complications to the family’s financial troubles.

Mero and Rollo misattribute their father’s “defection” to his inadequacy, and Mero even emphasizes the “guilty” look on his father’s face, as if the old man is ashamed. Mero does not, however, acknowledge the ranch’s inhospitality, which is a clear motivation behind his father’s career change. This misattribution reveals a larger problem amongst the Corn relatives: they have a poor understanding of nature and its mechanics, and seem unable to adapt to the natural world. Instead, the Corns choose to escape, or avoid the difficulties imposed by nature.

He heard the amazement in her voice, knew she was plotting his age, figuring he had to be eighty-three, a year or so older than Rollo, figuring he must be dotting around on a cane too, drooling the tiny days away, she was probably touching her own faded hair. He flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu. He would see his brother dropped in a red Wyoming hole. That event could jerk him back ...

**Related Characters:** Rollo Corn, Louise Corn, Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

Mero and Louise Corn are distant relatives who are introduced to each other for the first time during a phone call. Louise informs Mero that his brother, Rollo, has been killed by an emu on the ranch; it is Rollo’s funeral that prompts Mero to return home. Mero and Louise’s conversation illustrates Mero’s distance from family and home: he has stayed away from his relatives for decades, and has not been updated on the newer generations of the Corn family.

In addition, Mero’s response to Louise’s incredulity over his decision to drive home illustrates his lack of respect for family, and the feeling of superiority his escape has instilled in him. Mero acts as if he is being dragged home by his brother’s passing; he flippantly thinks to himself that the funeral is a way to “jerk him back” to Wyoming, and does not treat the situation with gravity. In fact, instead of mourning his brother, he surveys his body and believes, hubristically, that *he* could have dodged the emu that killed Rollo. Mero’s many years away from home have exacerbated both his misunderstanding of nature and his distance from family. He thinks he is exempt from nature’s violence, and more adept than his brother.

The old man’s hair was falling out, Mero was twenty-three and Rollo twenty and she played them all like a deck of cards. If you admired horses you’d go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks, so high and haunchy you’d want to clap her on the rear. The wind bellowed around the house, driving crystals of snow through the cracks of the warped log door and all of them in the kitchen seemed charged with some intensity of purpose.

**Related Characters:** Mero’s Father/Old Man, The

Girlfriend, Rollo Corn, Mero Corn

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mero remembers scenes from his youth that illustrate his family's complicated emotional dynamics. Mero's memories are vivid, depicting his family's complex relationships in impressive detail despite his decades away from home. In Mero's memory, his father's girlfriend was a flirt and a trickster who ensnared both Rollo and the old man simultaneously; Mero however, is not exempt from her charm, as he clearly describes her with sexually charged, animalistic language. Mero compares the girlfriend to a robust horse, a comparison he cites throughout his life. This recurrent vision of sexuality illustrates of Mero's often-cyclical thinking, a result of his overreliance on memory.

Mero's refusal to return home has given undue significance to his past: he has never visited the ranch, and must rely on unchallenged memories for perspective on his family's behavior. While it goes unstated in the story, Mero's memory of his father, brother, and father's girlfriend are likely the only insights Mero has into his family. This limited perspective forces him to dwell on material from the past.

☛ Mero had thrashed all that ancient night, dreamed of horse breeding or hoarse breathing, whether the act of sex or bloody, cut-throat gasps he didn't know. The next morning he woke up drenched in stinking sweat, looked at the ceiling and said aloud, it could go on like this for some time. He meant cows and weather as much as anything, and what might be his chances two or three states over in any direction. In Woolfoot, riding the Exercycle, he thought the truth was somewhat different: he'd wanted a woman of his own without scrounging the old man's leftovers.

**Related Characters:** Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 25

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mero begins to explain his rationale behind his escape from home. He claims that the monotony of ranching life, combined with the excitement of new opportunities, was enough to prompt his departure. He then uses the same horse imagery—another repeated pattern, clearly encoded in his memory—to frame his sexual curiosity, another reason for his escape. Mero repeatedly cites the same reasons for his departure, tracing them back to pivotal, unchanging memories from his youth. In this way, Mero hinders his own ability to grow, or develop psychological nuance. Instead, he relies on static memories to explain his behavior.

Moreover, Mero sees his escape as the creation of a new life. He frames his departure as a choice to reject his father's "leftovers" and see about "his chances" in new states. He does not, however, address the situation completely truthfully: he seems unable to acknowledge that his escape is a rebellion specifically against his upbringing.

☛ I'll tell you, on Tin Head's ranch things went wrong. Chickens changed color overnight, calves was born with three legs, his kids was piebald and his wife always crying for blue dishes. Tin Head never finished nothing he started, quit halfway through a job every time ... He was a mess with the galvy plate eating at his brain and his ranch and his family was a mess. But ... they had to eat, didn't they, just like anybody else?

**Related Characters:** The Girlfriend (speaker), Mero Corn, Tin Head

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26–27

### Explanation and Analysis

The girlfriend tells the Corn men the story of a rancher named Tin Head, ensnaring them further with her tale. In the story, Tin Head's ranch is struck by bizarre misfortunes: his livestock are born mutated, and his family members are equally peculiar with their unexpected baldness or their misplaced greed for "blue dishes." Tin Head's poor luck illustrates the enmity between man and nature: his ranch and family have been singled out for misfortune by the natural world, as demonstrated by his animals' and relatives' inexplicable oddities.

Still, the girlfriend emphasizes how Tin Head must "eat" and live off the land despite these obstacles. In this way, the girlfriend demonstrates how man and nature's antagonistic

relationship is, paradoxically, interdependent: regardless of the tension between man and nature, the former must rely on the latter to survive. Still, nature—as represented through Tin Head’s ranch and his dysfunctional animals—will hinder man’s livelihood.

●● He missed the westbound ramp and got into torn-up muddy streets, swung right and right again, using the motel’s SLEEP sign as a landmark, but he was on the wrong side of the interstate and the sign belonged to a different motel ... Halfway around the hoop he spied the interstate entrance ramp, veered for it, collided with a panel truck ... was rammed from behind by a stretch limo, the limo in its turn rear-ended by a yawning hydroblast operator in a company pickup ... His first thought was to blame Iowa and those who lived in it.

**Related Characters:** Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 28–29

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mero incites a multi-car accident on the highway after driving recklessly. Importantly, the accident is a result of Mero’s inability to remember a motel sign; this is an indication that his memory can be dangerously unreliable. Mero consistently gets lost in the past, often dredging up memories to better contextualize his choices. Mero’s decision to remain so over-reliant on memory indicates that he prioritizes his past over his present. Instead of being alert and focused on his drive, he instead misremembers key details and puts himself—and others—in danger.

In addition, Mero shows no remorse for the accident he has caused, revealing a sense of carelessness about his life. Mero does not react gratefully or cautiously after the non-fatal accident; instead, he blames other drivers, and does not even acknowledge the possibility that he could have died. In this way, Mero’s fixation on the past erodes his appreciation for the present: he does not seem to value his life as he is actually living it.

●● He crossed the state line, hit Cheyenne for the second time in sixty years ... That other time he had been painfully hungry, had gone into the restaurant in the Union Pacific station although he was not used to restaurants and ordered a steak, but when the woman brought it and he cut into the meat the blood spread across the white plate and he couldn’t help it, he saw the beast, mouth agape in mute bawling, saw the comic aspects of his revulsion as well, a cattleman gone wrong.

**Related Characters:** Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

As Mero gets closer to home, he remembers a time when he passed through Cheyenne, Wyoming and ordered a steak. The gory meat disgusts Mero—a reaction that likely contributed to his self-described “octogenarian vegetarian” lifestyle. Mero notes that it is particularly comical for him to be repulsed by meat, since if he had continued his work as a rancher, he would have been responsible for slaughtering livestock. Still, Mero emphasizes that his disgust marks him as a “cattleman gone wrong,” and seems to take pride in the stark difference between himself and his relatives.

Mero’s vegetarianism is, partially, an escape from his family’s legacy; instead of remaining a cattleman, he subverts expectations by refusing to eat meat. Mero does not acknowledge, however, that such a clear inversion of his family’s traditions reveals how important his upbringing and home remain to him (in that his identity is formed in direction opposition to them). Mero pays close attention to his upbringing’s customs: if he did not care about his past, he would not find such pride in challenging traditions.

●● Every year Tin Head butchers one of his steers, and that’s what they’d eat all winter long ... he hits the steer a good one with the axe and it drops stun down. He ties up the back legs, hoists it up and sticks it, shoves the tub under to catch the blood. When it’s bled out pretty good he ... starts skinning it ... and he gets the hide off about halfway and starts thinking about dinner. So he leaves the steer half-skinned there on the ground ... but first he cuts out the tongue which is his favorite dish.

**Related Characters:** The Girlfriend (speaker), Tin Head,

Mero Corn

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

The girlfriend continues to tell the story of Tin Head. This passage highlights the brutal treatment of the slaughtered steer. The steer is a necessary resource for Tin Head and his family; it is capable of sustaining them “all winter.” Despite this, Tin Head treats the steer with callous disrespect: he “drops” it with his axe, but does not confirm whether he has killed it before beginning to skin it. In addition, he begins to behave absentmindedly. He gets distracted by thoughts of dinner, and does not bother to finish the gory job of skinning the steer. In fact, Tin Head prioritizes his own selfish desires—for the steer’s tongue, his “favorite dish”—over a sense of respect for nature. The brutality of Tin Head’s actions, combined with his presumptuous treatment of the steer and his disregard for nature’s sacrifice, illustrates the misunderstanding and violence that defines man and nature’s relationship.

This dynamic is repeated throughout the story, with the Corn family mirroring Tin Head’s disrespectful treatment of the natural world. For example, the Corns import non-native animals to their farm, demonstrating their clear disregard for the environment and the ecosystem of their ranch. Tin Head’s unscrupulous treatment of nature foreshadows the Corns’ similar mistakes.

●● Yet everything was as it had been, the shape of the road achingly familiar, sentinel rocks looming as they had in his youth. There was an eerie dream quality in seeing the deserted Farrier place leaning east as it had leaned sixty years ago, the Banner ranch gate, where the companionable tracks he had been following turned off, the gate ghostly in the snow but still flying its wrought iron flag, unmarked by the injuries of weather, and the taut five-strand fences and dim shifting forms of cattle.

**Related Characters:** Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

As Mero gets closer to the ranch, the psychological distance between him and his childhood home disappears. Despite Mero’s conviction that he has left home behind, he still finds the road “achingly familiar,” and emphasizes how the landscape looks the same as it did in his “youth.” In this passage, the durable quality of home overpowers Mero’s sense of escape: the ranch has endured despite his departure, and even has a magnetism that draws him homeward.

Mero has constructed his identity as a rebellion against his upbringing, insisting that his departure has freed him from a confining, monotonous life in Wyoming; nevertheless, the ranch has remained a fixture for him. He highlights how there is an “eerie dream quality” to his home, a clear hint at the ranch’s power over his thoughts and feelings. In fact, Mero’s vivid memory of home—reaffirmed by the familiar sights he sees upon his return—has only strengthened his ties to the ranch. The ranch remains a solid, fixed concept; it endures and is kept alive both in his memory, and in reality.

●● Tin Head is just startled to pieces when he don’t see that steer ... but way over there in the west on the side of the mountain he sees something moving stiff and slow, stumbling along ... it was the steer, never making no sound. And just then it stops and it looks back ... Tin Head can see the raw meat of the head and the shoulder muscles ... and its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hate like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for and all of his kids and their kids is done for.

**Related Characters:** The Girlfriend (speaker), Mero Corn

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 37

### Explanation and Analysis

Continuing her story about Tin Head, the girlfriend reveals that After Tin Head returns from dinner—a meal that he prioritized over properly slaughtering the steer—he sees that the animal is gone. He then relocates it, and realizes that his disrespectful treatment of the steer, a wild animal, has led to his doom. The steer’s gory visage is the physical representation of the violent, yet codependent relationship

between man and the natural world. Tin Head brutalizes the steer, which he once nurtured as livestock, for resources; the interaction illustrates man's reliance on nature for sustenance, and animals' dependence on man for cultivation.

Tin Head's story also demonstrates nature's ability to enact revenge. Tin Head recognizes, after seeing the "teetotal hate" in the steer's eyes, that his family is fated to suffer for mishandling their natural resources. Tin Head's tale reveals the consequence of misunderstanding nature's grace: nature allowed his family to survive off the land, but now chooses to revoke that privilege and seek vengeance.

Now he remembered that the main entrance gate was on a side road that branched off well before the Banner place ... the map of the ranch in his memory was not as bright now, but scuffed and obliterated as though trodden. The remembered gates collapsed, fences wavered, while the badland features swelled into massive prominence. The cliffs bulged into the sky, lions snarled, the river corkscrewed through a stone hole at a tremendous rate and boulders cascaded from the heights. Beyond the barbwire something moved.

**Related Characters:** Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

As Mero gets closer to the ranch, his ability to achieve a safe homecoming dissipates. He begins to realize that the home he remembers is not what exists in reality; in fact, the "map of the ranch" is "obliterated." This violent description is echoed by the threatening characteristics of the landscape: cliffs seem huge and frightening, and the local animals turn hostile. Mero's homecoming is thereby interrupted by the ranch's menacing transformation: although the ranch seemed unchanging and familiar, it has actually altered in his absence. To Mero, home once represented a stable place and a constant concept that could help define his identity; now, the idea of home has destabilized. This instability renders his ability to return uncertain.

The ranch's newly perilous characteristics also reveal how Mero's over-reliance on memory is dangerous. Mero draws upon faulty recollections, and becomes lost on the ranch

due to miscalculating the location of the "main entrance gate." By prioritizing his past—a choice that has kept him from accepting the fallibility of his memories—Mero has placed himself in danger, in a place he no longer recognizes.

He walked against the wind, his shoes filled with snow, feeling as easy to tear as a man cut from paper. As he walked he noticed one from the herd inside the fence was keeping pace with him. He walked more slowly and the animal lagged. He stopped and turned. It stopped as well, huffing vapor, regarding him, a strip of snow on its back like a linen runner. It tossed its head and in the howling, wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching for him all this time.

**Related Characters:** Mero Corn

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 39–40

### Explanation and Analysis

In the conclusion of the story, Mero wanders through a snowstorm, unable to find his way home. Mero was initially confident in his homecoming, but ultimately ends up lost; he feels "easy to tear" and vulnerable, representing the frailty of man in the face of nature's power. Furthermore, the story implies that Mero will never truly return home: he had been "wrong" to try to escape. Mero's final scene, therefore, illustrates the inevitable consequence of an incomplete departure: unable to fully let go of his upbringing, he is stuck in-between his past and present, and barred from a complete homecoming.

Mero eventually realizes that he is being stalked by an animal—another instance of the natural world's hostile relationship with humanity—and acknowledges that the half-skinned steer from Tin Head's tale has tracked him down. The steer, an embodiment of nature's vengeance and an image from Mero's past, cannot be outrun; Mero's escape from home and from nature was temporary and illusionary at best.

The moral lesson of Tin Head's story repeats itself in Mero's life: nature endures in order to enact revenge, and will inevitably triumph over man. This triumph is inescapable: nature will achieve its aims, even if one is hubristic enough to believe he is exempt from retribution.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE HALF-SKINNED STEER

Mero Corn remembers his childhood **ranch**, built on “strange ground” near the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming. He left the ranch in 1936 to become a soldier, and worked various jobs; he also married three times, and got into “local politics.” He never came back to visit his father, whom he calls his old man, and his brother Rollo; he believed they would only be “bankrupt and ruined.”

Mero describes the **ranch** he grew up on: it was “impossible to run cows” there, and oftentimes the cattle would fall off cliffs or be killed by “marauding lions.” As a result, Mero’s old man became a mailman; Mero and Rollo perceived this career change as a “defection.” The brothers hoped to turn a modest profit as cattlemen, but Mero eventually left home. He “wound up” as an “octogenarian vegetarian widower” in Massachusetts many decades later.

Mero receives a call from Louise Corn, the wife of Rollo’s son, Tick; Mero does not know either of them. Louise informs Mero that Rollo was killed by an emu on the **ranch**. Louise adds that the ranch is now called “Down Under Wyoming,” because Rollo had “sold the place” to an Australian businessman who then converted it into a tourist destination. In 1978, the businessman turned partial ownership of the ranch over to Rollo, who had run it with Louise and Tick’s help for the “last ten years.”

Mero tells Louise Corn that he will drive back to Wyoming for Rollo’s funeral. Louise is surprised to hear that he is capable of driving at his advanced age, but Mero surveys his “muscular” body and believes he can make it home. In fact, he thinks he is healthy enough to “dodge an emu.” Mero then acknowledges that the funeral is enough to “jerk him back” to Wyoming.

*Mero, who left home in his youth to take up various jobs and marry multiple times, highlights how he never returned home to see his family. Mero’s initial departure from the ranch has shaped his life’s path, and seems to have resulted in a cycle of escapism and avoidance. Mero was not able to commit to a single career or partner, nor could he stomach coming home to see the family he left behind.*



*The Corn men, hindered by the hostile natural world, were ineffective ranchers. Mero sees his father’s career shift as a betrayal; nevertheless, Mero also chose a different lifestyle, and is proud of his decision. Even though both men’s choices illustrate similar needs to escape the ranch’s hostility, Mero believes his own departure?another type of family betrayal?makes him superior to his father.*



*Mero learns about the ranch from relatives he has never met; his unfamiliarity indicates that he has remained distant and estranged from his home for decades. Rollo’s death reveals another aspect of the Corn family’s hostile relationship with the natural world: the Corns, who have barely adapted to their inhospitable land, inevitably lose a family member to nature’s viciousness.*



*Mero agrees to return home, ending his decades-long period of escapism. Mero believes his strength is the result of his lifestyle, which makes him superior to his relatives. He also believes that he is capable of escaping an emu attack, and thus of triumphing over nature. Mero is convinced that his choices differentiate him from his family, and exempt him from the violent relationship between man and nature.*



Mero remembers why he had “pulled away” from home, and cites the arrival of his old man’s girlfriend. Mero claims the woman was a talented storyteller who “played them” like a “deck of cards,” and ensnared his brother Rollo with her charms. He compares her to a **horse**, and notes how her “glossy eyes” would flick between the old man and Rollo. Mero recognizes that the girlfriend provided a source of tension that “charged” the men with “purpose.”

Mero also remembers vividly the image of his old man drinking Everclear at the kitchen table. The alcohol would lighten up his father’s “gangstery face,” but get him exceedingly drunk. In the present, Mero wonders how long his father has been dead; he thinks it must be “fifty years or more.”

Mero reminisces about a story told by his father’s girlfriend, about a rancher named Tin Head who has a “metal plate” embedded in his skull. After hearing the story, Mero had a revelation: he remembers thinking his life would monotonously drag on “like this for some time.” He also acknowledges that, in his youth, he wanted a girlfriend “of his own.” For these reasons, he decided to escape from the **ranch** and see what “his chances” would be in other states.

Continuing with his drive homeward, Mero tries to “cover some ground” on the highway and is pulled over by a cop. The cop asks Mero where he is going, and Mero momentarily forgets why he is driving to Wyoming. The speeding ticket he then receives reminds Mero of his haste to escape the **ranch**, and he once again cites the girlfriend’s flirtations with both Rollo and his old man as motivation for his departure.

Mero recalls the next part of Tin Head’s story. The girlfriend narrates how “things went wrong” on Tin Head’s ranch, and how he seemed particularly plagued by misfortune: Tin Head’s chickens would mysteriously turn blue, and his calves would often be born mutated. Even his family seemed cursed; his children were inexplicably born “piebald.”

*Mero then describes childhood flashbacks, indicating that he is a man who gets lost in his memories. Mero describes how his father’s girlfriend added tension to his life, whereas previously, the family was only at odds with nature. Mero’s keen memory is his only source of family connection: as he never returned home, he has no other insights into his brother and father except what is provided in these scenes.*



*Mero’s concept of his father?drawn solely from childhood memories?was negative; this kept him from returning home, which is why Mero does not know when his father passed away. Mero, unwilling to return even for his father’s funeral, dwelt on memories of his father instead of returning home to make new ones.*



*Mero describes the girlfriend’s story of Tin Head?a story whose moral lessons are mirrored in his own life?and remembers the initial realizations behind his need for escape. Mero’s vivid recall of the past allows him to pinpoint multiple reasons for his departure. Moreover, his memory also introduces the Tin Head’s story, which foreshadows the danger Mero is in. Mero’s memories allow him to simplify his past, but they also contain hints about the peril of the present.*



*Mero’s temporary forgetfulness indicates that his memories are interfering with his life in the present. He then re-emphasizes the emotional tension between his brother, father, and his father’s girlfriend, repeating his reasons for his departure. Mero’s continual citation of this tension reveals the limited perspective he has of his family. He constantly refers to the same scenes, as he never returned home to create new memories.*



*Mero continues to recall the girlfriend’s tale, indicating that the story has remained important to him for decades. Tin Head’s family is cursed by bad luck: its animals suffer unnatural fates, indicating a tense, hostile dynamic between man and nature. This antagonism between Tin Head’s family and the natural world is replicated in the Corn family’s relationship with nature: both families suffer misfortune, such as inhospitable land or odd accidents.*



Mero then describes his sexual awakening as a young man. In Mero's youth, his old man instructed an anthropologist to take Mero to see some wall drawings. The anthropologist asked Mero if he knew about one image in particular, which Mero thought was a **horseshoe**. The anthropologist laughed at Mero for his innocence, and told him it was actually a picture of female genitalia. As a result of this interaction, Mero perpetually associates horse-related images with female anatomy for the rest of his adulthood.

Mero awakes early from an overnight motel stay in Des Moines and continues with his drive. He misses the ramp on the highway, and misremembers what motel sign to use as a "landmark." Then, he finds another entranceway ramp and drives recklessly towards it, triggering a multi-car accident; instead of blaming himself, he criticizes other drivers. He then buys another car, emphasizing how he can "do that" sort of thing "if he liked."

Mero reaches Kearney, Nebraska, and stops for the night without eating dinner. He dreams that he is back at the **ranch**, but the furniture has disappeared, and soldiers are fighting with guns in the yard. The soldiers' bullets break the windows and destroy the floorboards; underneath the destroyed flooring, "galvanized tubs" are filled with "dark, coagulated" liquid.

With 400 miles to go, Mero drives through Cheyenne, Wyoming. He notes how it is the "second time" he has traveled through the place in sixty years. The last time he had visited, he stopped in a restaurant and ordered a **bloody steak**: the sight of it repulsed him, and he labeled himself a "cattleman gone wrong." Mero emphasizes how his "revulsion" seems comic in the context of his rancher upbringing.

Mero then calls Louise Corn and tells her he will reach the **ranch** by late afternoon. Louise informs Mero that there is a possibility of snow, and Mero says he will be careful; as soon as he hangs up, however, he gets back on the road. As he drives, the "calm" of his past decades disappears, and he feels like the same young, angry man who escaped home in 1936.

*Mero continues his pattern of using a single, strong memory to illustrate a pivotal moment in his life, indicating his inability to grow or move on. For Mero, a solitary memory or past scene is adequate explanation for his behavior.*



*In the present, Mero continues to demonstrate forgetfulness and recklessness. He causes an accident by misremembering his location, and his dismissive reaction reveals how careless he is with his life. This is a consequence of his fixation on the past: as his present is overtaken by memory, he stops caring about his current circumstances. Mero also brags that he is rich enough to buy another car, offering a stark contrast to his family's unprofitable ranching career. He takes pride in his wealth, believing it is the result of superior life choices.*



*Even Mero's dreams are overtaken with images of his childhood home, illustrating how he has never truly escaped the ranch's influence. In his dream, aspects of Tin Head's story?such as galvanized metal?begin to blend with images of home, foreshadowing the tale's significance for Mero's homecoming. The violent imagery of the dream emphasizes the hostile nature of the ranch; Mero remembers this hostility, despite his years away.*



*The steak is a product of the violence between man and nature; animals are often killed to provide resources for humans. Mero's revulsion is particularly unusual, however, as he grew up ranching, an occupation that involves slaughtering animals. Instead, Mero chose the inverse of the life he left behind: he becomes a vegetarian, a choice that allows him to rebel against his home's traditions.*



*As Mero gets closer to Wyoming, he refuses to outwait a storm; the ranch's magnetism draws him home despite obvious dangers. Mero also admits that his homecoming is emotionally fraught. Despite escaping in 1936, his return still regresses him to his youth. As Mero returns home, he begins to acknowledge the ranch's influence over him, despite his attempts to escape.*



Mero recalls the next part of the girlfriend's tale of Tin Head. Tin Head was known to pick a steer for slaughter every year; he would use the meat and resources to provide for his family. One year, however, he stuns a steer and bleeds the animal out, but his wife's call to dinner distracts him, and he leaves the job unfinished. Tin Head only **skins the steer halfway**.

In the present, Mero continues his drive, which has become perilous in the snowy, windy weather. Suddenly, the snow clears, and Mero can see the road in front of him once again. Mero thinks back to why he left the **ranch** initially, and wonders if he escaped "without hard reason." He then admits it was time to "find his own territory," and prides himself for his sexual conquests.

Mero, who is now twenty miles from the **ranch**, highlights how the road feels "achingly familiar." He begins to dwell on the "shape" of the ranch, recalling the landscape with intimate detail. Mero claims the scenery has an "eerie dream quality," as the landmarks have remained the same for sixty years.

Mero returns to the girlfriend's narration of Tin Head's story. In this part of the tale, Tin Head finishes his dinner and walks outside, only to realize that the **steer** is gone. The only evidence of the steer is a tongue left behind on the ground?Tin Head had cut it out to make his favorite meal?and a tub of blood leftover from the skinning process.

In the present, Mero misses the turnoff to the **ranch**. He claims the image of it is "sharp" in his mind, but he has to retrace his route, and his car's tire gets stuck. He decides to wait in the car until morning, when he can ask for help from a neighbor, Bob Banner. Mero then realizes this would be impossible, as Banner would have to be "120 years old" to still be alive. Mero then gets out of the car to try to extricate the tire. He emphasizes how the cold feels biting sharp, and how the wind buffets him.

*Tin Head disrespects nature when he leaves the skinning of the steer incomplete, indicating a lack of reverence for the steer's sacrifice. The gory imagery reinforces the violent relationship between man and nature: out of a need to survive, humanity must overpower elements of the natural world.*



*As Mero gets closer to home, the natural landscape of the ranch resists him: the snow and wind seem to actively hinder his progress. Mero, lost in his memory, falls into similar patterns: he reprises already repeated rationales for his escape. He believes, despite his fixation on the past and his childhood, that he has escaped and built a new life for himself.*



*As the distance between Mero and the ranch shrinks, the power and influence of his home grows. In his mind, the ranch feels familiar, and he is able to recall small details?this belies his insistence that he has escaped the ranch and never looked back. Rather, the ranch has endured despite his time away, and it remains fixed in both his memory and in reality.*



*Mero's recollection of Tin Head's story continues, despite the increasingly dangerous trip homeward; in this way, Mero once again prioritizes the past over the present. The tale uses increasingly bloody images to emphasize humans' violence against the natural world. Moreover, Tin Head's decision to cut out the steer's tongue?but not finish the job?is an added sign of disrespect. He prioritizes his preferences, emphasizing his misunderstanding and mistreatment of nature.*



*As Mero approaches the end of his homecoming journey, his memory of the past suddenly degrades. He miscalculates the entrance to the ranch, and gets lost as a result?a representation of how he is lost in his memory?and then continues to misremember details of his childhood. Mero's homecoming is deferred by his faulty memory, which leads him to take a wrong route home.*



Tin Head's story continues, and the girlfriend narrates how Tin Head is surprised by the steer's absence. At first, he thinks a neighbor has stolen it, but then he sees something moving slowly in the distance. Tin Head notes that the moving object looks "raw," and then realizes it is the **half-skinned steer**. As the animal looks at Tin Head with hate-filled eyes, he understands that "he is done for" and that his family has been cursed to suffer.

Outside in the cold, Mero senses that he is on the **ranch**, even though he cannot place his exact location; however, Mero acknowledges that the ranch "in his memory" is not "as bright." Mero tries to open the car door, and sees that he left the keys in the ignition. He smashes a rock through the car window to retrieve them; he then realizes that the passenger door was already unlocked. Frustrated, he gets back into the car and tries to put it in reverse.

The snow proves too cumbersome for Mero's car, and he realizes he is stuck on a "remorselessly long hill." The tires eventually slip in the snow, and the engine of his car dies. Mero realizes that his situation is likely fatal, and claims it is "almost a relief" to get to this "point."

Mero gets out of the car and continues his journey on foot, thinking it may not be "that far." He looks around at the "violent country" of the **ranch**, and feels insubstantial and fragile. He notices a herd of cattle, and realizes one of the animals is following him. Mero looks closer, and sees that the animal is the **half-skinned steer**, who has been "watching" and waiting for him to return.

*Despite the increasing number of obstacles to his homecoming, Mero delays his return to recall the end of Tin Head's story. In the tale, Tin Head realizes his disrespect for nature has led to his doom: nature, personified by the bloody steer, will seek vengeance for Tin Head's laziness and cruelty. Tin Head's realization that he is cursed illustrates how nature and man's relationship ends in destruction; nature will seek revenge against those who do it harm.*



*Mero's memory of home clashes with the reality of his circumstances. He realizes he has almost returned to the ranch, but admits that his memory of home has eroded; paradoxically, his memories have kept from his final homecoming. In his increasing confusion, he leaves his car keys in the ignition, and foolishly smashes a window to retrieve them. Mero's unfortunate situation is a result of his reliance on the past; by prioritizing memory over the present, he puts himself in danger.*



*Mero's inability to remember the route home, combined with nature's harsh conditions, has prevented his homecoming. Mero seems to except his fate at nature's hands, admitting that he is relieved to not truly return home. By not reaching home, Mero is permitted to stay in limbo: he remains stuck in memories of his childhood home. These memories cannot be rewritten, as he will never reach the ranch.*



*In the last scene of the story, Mero's confrontation with the landscape and the steer reinforces man's powerlessness in the face of nature's wrath. The snow and sweeping view contrasts with Mero's frailty. Moreover, his realization that the steer has been waiting for his return emphasizes nature's ability to endure. Mero's homecoming is thwarted by nature's vengeance: like in Tin Head's story, nature has fated Mero to suffer?just like his other relatives have suffered?and he cannot outrun the curse.*





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