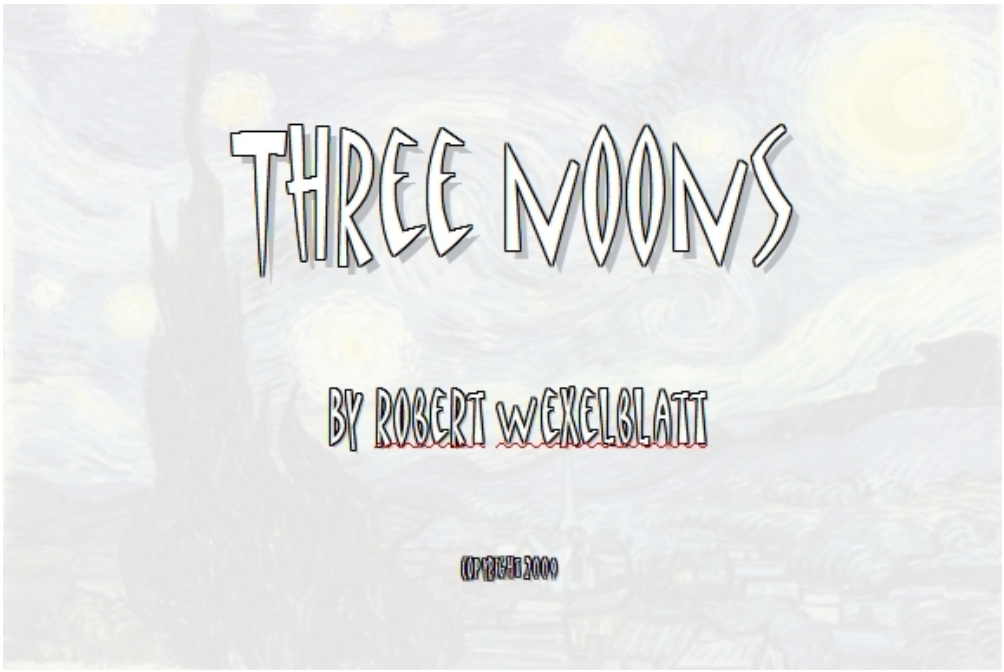

He was tired of the sight of bare lath and low beams and in no hurry to open his eyes. He rubbed his stubble then felt gingerly down below to see if the bandage were wet, sniffed at his fingers. He remembered the field hospitals. That was where he had first heard the word sepsis. He still shied away from hand saws.

In the next room, assuming he made it through the night, Folsom would be lying just like him. He'd plugged Folsom in the shoulder of his shooting arm and Folsom had hit him in the thigh. It all happened in an instant, coming on each other like that in the alley, guns drawn, surprise and fear in their eyes, both Colts going off simultaneously, not aimed, just desperately pointed, or meant to kill so much as keep from being killed. The proof, he reflected, was that neither of them had ventured a second shot, though it would have been easy. It wasn't because they were deafened by the reverberation or stunned by their pain, or even that they were both on the ground in horse shit. Folsom's pistol lay in easy reach and both had been conscious. Funny thing. His gun was still in his hand and he could have blown a hole in Folsom's head if he'd chosen and Folsom still had the use of his left hand. Instead they waited, a few yards away from one another, breathing hard against the hurt, looking at each other, anger and fear drained as by anticlimax. Then Folsom began to hum. He recollected how in the war gut-shot men would hum until they went into shock. And then, after about a century, somebody dared to peer around the corner; he wasn't sure who. The word went out —"both down!"—as if they'd been a pair of pugilists. No doubt there'd been odds given and bets laid. It was that sort of town. Who would expect otherwise? Very well, it was a draw, then. But no, not a draw, not if Folsom were in custody or bled to death.

The town, reduced to filthy boots, argued over what to do. "Well, damn it. Can't just leave 'em here," said Hank. "Shite. Go and fetch the doc," said Hanrahan. Who else would say "fetch" with that Hibernian lilt, let alone "shite"? So they were picked up, one man per limb. Folsom screamed when they took up his right arm. After that he fell quiet, unconscious probably. He'd nearly passed out himself.

They were laid out side by side in the saloon. Damp sawdust. The doctor arrived and began to swear in German, women rubbernecking over his shoulder and all of them stinking of whiskey. In the old country Furst had trained as an eye doctor but he always did what he could and people trusted him because there was no point in not doing so. He poured whiskey liberally on the wounds against infection, wrapped bandages that were most likely ripped from whores' sheets. Then more whiskey, bottle against his lips. "Trink, trink," Furst ordered. After

that they were lugged upstairs. There was a brief argument over the appropriation of rooms in which he was in no condition to participate.

Folsom paid the first visit. His door was open and Folsom looked in sheepishly, unsure what to say.

“Well, so you’re alive,” he said. “Good. But why aren’t you locked up?”

Folsom squeezed through the narrow doorway and with a grimace shrugged his good shoulder. “You okay?”

“Guess so. Doc says.”

They were like old men; neither considered the other a threat.

Folsom asked permission to come and sit on the foot of the bed. “Hurts more when I stand,” he explained. He was being hilariously polite.

“Suit yourself, I don’t mind.”

Folsom put his rear end on the bed delicately, so as not to disturb the Sheriff He was quiet for a full minute, maybe two.

“I did hit that Johnson fellow.”

“I know you did. There were only about a dozen witnesses.”

“We’d been drinking, of course. You know how it is. We got to re-fighting Gettysburg because we were both there and he said some things I just couldn’t abide. About General Longstreet first. Well, I bore that. But then he began on Robert E. Lee. So I hit him with a bottle, and not even that hard.”

“You damned near killed the man, if he isn’t dead yet.”

Folsom lowered his head. “An accident.”

“You picked up the bottle, didn’t you? You hit him over the head with it?”

“I didn’t mean it was an accident that Johnson got his head split. I meant it was an accident I split it. Any man who’d served under Longstreet might’ve done the same—would have too, after what Johnson said—but I was patient with him. It was General Lee that did it.” After this speech Folsom paused, breathing hard. “Tell me something. If I heard right, you were at Gettysburg too Didn’t hear what corps. Not one of Pickett’s poor Virginia boys, were you?”

The sheriff frowned.

“So,” said Folsom very carefully, “the way I se it, it could’ve been you. No offense.”

He looked Folsom, a man who had almost killed him and whom he’d almost killed. “None taken, Folsom. But it’s of no account.”

“No accident that you had to come after me, though.”

“The job.”

“Exactly,” drawled Folsom and nodded two times. “That’s the truth of it, no mistake. And yet some might consider even that an accident. I mean that they hired you to be the Law

hereabouts and not somebody else."

"What? You, for instance?"

"Well, why not? We're the sort they hire, aren't we?"

"They?"

"Barbed wire people, dry goods and opera house people, church and schoolhouse people."

The sheriff laughed but not because Folsom was wrong. He'd got his job because after three men had been killed on one Saturday the town was desperate and he'd just happened to knock down those two drunken cowboys and took their guns away. He wasn't any better than Folsom and saw no point in pretending to be.

"Where's the deputy? He ought to be keeping a watch on you."

"Deputy? Went to buy himself a beefsteak, I think. Nice enough fellow, but kind of stringy. Looked to me like he could do with a couple of beefsteaks."

The sheriff smiled. "I call him Rail."

"Rail?"

"He looks something like a fence rail."

"Was Rail coming after me, too?"

The Sheriff laughed at this. "What? Rail?"

Folsom laughed also. "No, I allow as he probably wouldn't."

The women more or less took care of them for two weeks, though they badly wanted the rooms. The sheriff paid for his own food and Folsom paid for his Rail would visit after supper bearing the news which seldom amounted to much. The sheriff and Folsom played some cards and talked. Mostly Folsom talked. He seemed to need to talk about the war and the sheriff let him.

As soon as he was able to hobble about he ordered up a bottle from the bar and took it into Folsom's room and they got drunk and had some laughs.

Rail reported that Johnson was considerably better, though he still had headaches and didn't always see quite straight. When the sheriff told Folsom this he said how sorry he was and wondered what the charge would be assuming Johnson kept on getting better.

"Battery, I suppose."

"Battery?"

"Legal for beating."

Folsom considered this. "Battery," he said, no doubt thinking of artillery. "Oh."

By the third week both men were so recovered that Furst told them they could go about their business if only they did it slowly and the rooms could go back to their original purpose which would be a general relief. Folsom didn't have the four dollars the doctor insisted on, only two, so the sheriff made up the difference.

“Thank you,” said Folsom. “I owe you.”

“You can pay me back some time.”

“Why, sure, sure. Word and bond.”

The two looked at each other and felt suddenly abashed.

“What do we do now?” asked Folsom.

The sheriff shrugged and took a quick look over his shoulder though nobody was around. Then he brushed at the star on his vest, turned his back on Folsom, and limped down the stairway.

II.

Another hot, dry day, the fifth of June. He leaned against the lintel and looked apathetically at the empty street, the three bleached cottonwoods, the absence of clouds.

He had done his utmost to get help, humbled himself, offered to deputize almost all the men —Hank and Hanrahan and the rest. Charlie Ransome had grabbed at his arm as he passed him on his accustomed bench and, for a moment he had even been tempted to accept the old man’s offer. “I’ll stand with you,” Charlie had wheezed consumptively, trying literally but unsuccessfully to do it there and then.

It was a trial to see how they hid from him or, if they weren’t quick enough, turned away. The most humiliated tried to pick a fight. As for the women, they began to glance at him furtively, as though he were already a carcass, as if he were Death and wanted to steal their men away. Ever since the boy showed up it had been like that.

Apparently the Johnson boy had been out fixing a fence when Folsom’s man rode up, handed him the note and a fifty-cent piece to deliver it.

> You kilt my brother. Now me and my boys are going to
> even things Be seeing you on the sixth inst.
>
> Very truly yours,
> J. Folsom

Very truly yours. Now where had a mean character like Folsom picked up that lawyerly phrase? Mean Folsom famously was, said to have shot a man in a bunkhouse for snoring too loud and another in an Abilene saloon just because his mustache reminded him of his father’s, so maybe he had killed his daddy too. Folsom’s letter was roughly written in pencil on the back of an old wanted poster. The news went through town like spoiled meat through a Philadelphian.

You kilt my brother. All he’d done was track Henry Folsom down and arrest him, which was what he was supposed to do, what the town expected of him, what even Folsom ought to have expected. There had been a trial, a proper one, since the circuit judge came through that same week. Henry Folsom had been judged and the law had executed him fair and square. He’d shot down an unarmed sodbuster named Jenkins and then raped his wife. Mrs. Jenkins couldn’t speak for shame but she bravely pointed her finger at him in court. So it was all square. But that didn’t count with Folsom, who had a code of his own and had to take somebody’s life for Henry’s, which was his idea of how to even things. You didn’t smack your

lips over legal niceties with the likes of Folsom.

He put his feet up on the desk to give the matter full consideration one last time. Nobody in his position could help but feel let down. Still, he didn't relish the way resentment coiled up in his gut. He also hated feeling frightened, and he was scared. If he lit out Folsom just might shoot up the town but then the town deserved to be shot up. On the other hand, Folsom might just ride out to track him down the same way he'd done with Henry. Folsom might even find that fitting. Any way the he turned it over, sticking around would be foolish.

He unpinned the badge from his vest and laid it carefully on the desk, bright side up. It made him feel lighter but also more exposed. He pulled his canteen from under the cot and took down the Winchester, which he examined carefully, since it hadn't been used for a while. From the ammunition drawer he pocketed two handfuls of extra rifle rounds, not even bothering to count, then filled his cartridge belt. Sitting on the cot he slowly cleaned and oiled his Colt, waiting for sundown. He could buy food from the Olsons, whose place was two miles outside of town. Then he would light out. Maybe up to Wyoming. Maybe west all the way to California. There was plenty of space. Anyway, he would run.

After Appomatox he had imagined a limitless refuge between the whited sepulchres of the East and the frank debauchery of San Francisco. Because he could write a fair hand he'd found work as a clerk in St. Joe, but he soon tired of registering the departures of others. So he bought himself a used outfit and a decent horse and for a year he was a cowpuncher, which he thought a good life once he'd callused up and accustomed himself to the shit and the Indians. By the campfires he dreamed of women; every cowboy did. He'd have liked to pity the cheap whores who were the only females he saw in those days; but they were so hard, sentiment of any variety seemed misplaced. "Poker and poke her," Purdy, the squinty old trail boss had joked bitterly the night before they finished the drive at Abilene. The old coot said it as if what he anticipated weren't crude pleasures but a sentence, as if the muddy cow town were a canker on the clean rolling plains, a sewer into which all the foulness of men ran. Come to that, what did he really think of the civilization he had been serving for two years? Had he come to agree with Purdy? Well, what did it matter what he thought? That's the way the tide was running and had been ever since Lewis and Clark first settled their rear-ends in a canoe, ever since Henry Hudson blundered on his river, ever since deluded Columbus sloshed onto that unfortunate island. So probably there would come a time when men would hang up their guns. But that time sure wasn't yet.

He slipped into the livery stale well after dark, saddled his horse, and, keeping clear of the lit-up saloon, headed out of town. If anybody caught sight of him, which was not unlikely, they were no keener on a discussion of the merits of discretion than he was. No matter. His absence would be noted soon enough and eagerly reported to Folsom. He could picture his fellow citizens, the apprehensively smiles, the anxious pointing.

Around midnight he rousted Olson out of bed and bought beans and salted meat off him. Olson threw in some tobacco too, but they hardly said a word to one another. Neither Folsom nor the absence of the badge came in for a mention. He had done Olson a few good turns and both men understood that was what the tobacco and the silence were for.

Shortly after dawn he caught sight of a couple turkey buzzards spreading their wings on the early updrafts. Mockingbirds and meadowlarks sang among the high tufts of brown grass. For a minute the boulders turned violet then pink and there was velvety warmth to the air as the sun commenced to rise. It wasn't the first dawn he reckoned might be his last, yet it was the first since the war that found him on the run. Perhaps there comes a time, he speculated, when cowardice looks like prudence. He wondered what would be said of him by the town that day; for the town he now pictured as a single person, a timorous but disapproving farmer or a gangly teenager ashamed of his father. Since he'd taken the sheriff's job there had been some good days when he felt the town to be his, under his protection, and he'd sauntered through it like a sole proprietor. Now his vanity was borne in on him. Belonging had been an

illusion—that the town and he had belonged to each other—the worst of it being that he'd permitted himself to think he was what he thought the town believed of him. Up against the starkness of a killer like Folsom the mirage had evaporated like the ponds that would presently spread on the flatlands. All had gone with that five-pointed piece of tin.

From time to time he'd dismount to rest or to water his horse and drag some sage over his tracks. It wasn't a serious effort but one he felt obliged to make since he was now to live by prudence. He'd changed his direction three times, too.

It ought to have been a shock to see the dust rising behind him; and yet, he wasn't at all surprised. He realized he'd never believed he could evade Folsom, not from the moment the Johnson boy had handed him that poster. This surprise was that he'd lied to himself about that as well

He headed for the high ground to his left, trying not to raise dust of his own. He was in unfamiliar territory but the big rock formations promised some tiny chance of safety. He rose on his stirrups and swiveled his body to look back. They were closing on him. He counted four riders, like the ones in the Bible, riding so hard they must not have cared about killing their mounts.

He picked his way among the outcrops, the horse stepping delicately along the edges of scree. There was no hope that Folsom had missed him; he had seen them turn. Should he look for some high defile and set up an ambush or make a run for it? During the war they had done both and neither mattered in the end. He had yet to decide the question when he ran up against a towering wall of limestone. There was no way out; he had blundered into a box canyon. "Figures," he said to himself as he dismounted and pulled out the Winchester. As he scanned the rocks he wondered if Folsom, that free-ranging renegade, had known where he was headed and was laughing at him.

He climbed, pulling the horse after him, then wedged the reins between two boulders well behind the spot he had chosen and made ready for a last stand. The sun was directly overhead. He held the rifle close, unwilling to give himself away by a glint from the barrel just to get off one or two clear shots. He peered over the edge and saw them just below. They had their pistols drawn and were looking up. Suddenly the one with the long black beard shouted and made a sweeping motion with his arm. All four hastened to dismount when shots reverberated all through the canyon. Two bullets struck close to him and then he felt like someone had stuck a hot poker across his flank. He looked around wildly and saw an Indian moving rapidly across a rock above him; then there were more shots from across the canyon.

Folsom and his men never got off a single round. He saw their bodies jump as they were hit, saw them fall, still jumping. The noise was awful. He slipped down a crevice, pressing his hand against his bleeding side. For a full minute everything went silent then he heard a movement above him, the soft sound of moccasins. A war party looking for horses—probably Sioux, maybe Commanches. He was never good at the names of tribes. There were good Indians who didn't kill you and bad ones who did. He waited for them to come looking for him and prayed his horse would know enough to keep quiet.

The Indians must have been in a hurry. Or maybe they forgot about him or just counted wrong. It was hard to figure. They never came and, after a good long while squeezed in that crevice, he decided to risk a peek.

He crawled over the rock. Four corpses lay spread out below, blood all over their chests and legs. Just one had been scalped, so those Sioux must have been in a rush, were on the run like him and needed those ponies. Hanrahan had mentioned seeing some cavalry the week before.

His side hardly hurt at all, unless he took a deep breath. So, inhaling as shallowly as he

could, he retrieved his horse and led him down to the dead bodies. The terrified mare shied and he stroked her nose. The one with the long black beard, shot neatly in the forehead, had "Folsom" scratched on his belt.

It was late afternoon when he trudged back into town. It had taken two days what with walking the horse with the body laying over his saddle. Folsom kept falling off.

He led the horse up the street. People gaped, said things, called out his name, but, seeing the set of his face, nobody dared to approach him.

He halted outside the saloon and, grabbing a leg, yanked the body from the horse and left it in the street. Then he took the horse to the livery and then walked straight back to his office.

The badge was where he'd left it. He picked it up and pinned it on his vest. Then he lay down on the cot.

Hanrahan and Rail turned up a few minutes later, followed by pretty nearly the whole town. The Irishman spoke first. Perhaps that's why it was his version of events that became history, displacing all suspicion, embarrassment, and guilt.

"Well, Sheriff, you're a clever one all right. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, but we'd figured you'd run off. Soon as the Folsom bunch showed up they took off after you. Lord knows what they'd have done if they'd found you here." He turned around and spoke to the crowd. Hanrahan looked at him a moment, considering what he was about to do, and then he said what he must have felt he had to say. "Why, he saved the town, he did!" Then he turned back to the sheriff. "Handsomely done, boyo. What say I stand the first drink? Sure, if there's any justice in the round world you'll never need to pay for one again."

III.

The moment he laid eyes on Eurydice Folsom, even before he caught her scent or touched her hand, his knees buckled. That's how it was.

He knew who this woman was, at least who her husband was. Every lawman in the territory knew about Jacob Folsom who had gone completely to the bad after blowing one of his hired hands nearly in half with a shotgun. He had been a successful rancher; now, turned outlaw, he seemed determined to make an equally good job of it. He gathered a gang of toughs and made a specialty of robbing banks, though there was also the occasional train or dry goods store. The banks and the railroad had put a rather flattering price on his head.

Folsom's spread was twenty miles away and in the neighboring jurisdiction It was the ranch about which Eurydice had come to see him. The first bank her husband had robbed held their mortgage and was now trying to foreclose notwithstanding that she'd done well running the place on her own and hadn't missed a payment. The local sheriff was the banker's brother-in-law and declined to get involved. She'd consulted the town's only lawyer but he was on the bank's board and would do nothing for her. In fact, he was working to get the foreclosure approved.

"I didn't know where else to turn," she said in a voice that sounded like an April afternoon in Charleston. "You've a good reputation," she added, lowering her eyes. "My husband's a monster. A monster. I hope he's arrested for what he's done but it's not right for them to take my land." She paused and looked at him in a way that made her seem something other than distraught. "Is it, Sheriff?"

He promised to do what he could. He would take the matter up with the county attorney, he

said, and the U.S. Marshall's office. He admitted that he didn't know much about property law.

"I'm hardly an expert either but I believe the law's on my side in this. May I sit down?" Apologizing, he rushed to put a chair behind her. Taking her time, carefully smoothing her skirt under her, she placed herself in the chair and looked up at him. "Tell me, Sheriff, are you a married man yourself?" This made him blush and that made her smile.

He got two dinners from the saloon and she stayed with him that night. Since then had ridden twenty miles to her place every Thursday and twenty miles back the next day. It wasn't much of a secret, none at all in fact, but he didn't care. If men like Rail shook their heads and frowned or those like Hanrahan grinned and winked, what was that to him?

She enjoyed talking about her husband, even in bed, though he hardly encouraged her. According to his wife, Folsom drank to excess, regularly molested squaws, beat up piano players, cheated at cards, lied as a matter of pure habit, was an ungenerous lover, and had in his earlier years jumped claims and rustled cattle. Marrying him was a ghastly mistake, she said, a girl's foolishness. Folsom had deceived not just her but also her parents, both now deceased. He had been all meretricious manner and put-on charm. The man had shamelessly claimed to have been a colonel under Lee which was as big a lie as everything else about him. It was her bride money that went for the down payment on the ranch and her business head that made it prosper. To her he behaved like a brute. And jealous—that was what led to his murdering that Johnson, his accusing the poor man of looking at her in the wrong way. Folsom often struck her, she confided tearfully. Her tears were hard for him to bear. He held her close and stroked her shoulders.

He credited all she said not because he was certain of its truth but because he couldn't face what it would mean not to have believed her. That's how it was with him.

Meanwhile, he prevailed on the county attorney, who owed him three favors, to intervene in the case so as at least to delay a court order. Official letters were sent to the bank president and Eurydice with copies to him. The matter required study, wrote the county attorney, and he might become a party. He would need to examine the bank's records, the mortgage agreement, and the deed. In the meantime, no action should be taken Eurydice's gratitude was boundless. When he next rode out she met him by outside the door, half undressed, threw her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, and kissed him until he was breathless. She had made him a cherry pie and a roast of beef and kept him in bed straight from Thursday afternoon till Friday morning.

A week later Rail brought the post to the office, a sorrowful look on his perpetually long face. "Personal letter for you." He spoke ruefully, knowing already who had written it and what it signified.

Folsom was calling him out. The language was flowery, the handwriting almost feminine.

> Sir,
>
> I regret to hear that you have been fornicating with my wife. I don't know what the bitch told you; however, you will appreciate that scarcely matters, as, whatever else she is, she remains my wife and not yours, for which, in my opinion you ought to be grateful. I intend to be up your way next week when you can try to kill me, but don't think of making an arrest. This is between us and, like all affairs of honor, a fatal necessity of manhood, however stupid.

Was he in the wrong or the right in this business? Folsom was an outlaw, a killer, and yet he had wronged him. Eurydice was Folsom's wife yet Folsom betrayed and beat her, besides which she loved him and not Jacob Folsom. That he could be in some measure both wrong and right was perplexing because he was a man who insisted on clarity, though he admitted to himself the simplicity of his life was finished the moment he saw her. Was it conceivable Folsom had been right about Johnson? Had whatever happened gone beyond looking? He tried to dismiss such doubts and blamed himself for them. Folsom lied. However, the last sentence of the letter affected him. He read it over and over, thinking how the man had linked honor with stupidity. It was a curious thing to write; it was the declaration of an interesting man.

Eurydice came to warn him in the morning. Folsom had sent a man to tell her what he intended to do to her lover and precisely when and she had ridden through the night to alert him. "Why, he might be here already," she said fearfully, "lurking in some alleyway with his men to help him, which would be exactly like him. Get a posse together," she ordered, "shoot him on sight."

He did what he could to calm her down.

As it happened, Folsom rode into town an hour later, quite openly and entirely alone. He dismounted outside the sheriff's office and called. The street emptied at once. Eurydice began to shake. "Don't let him see me!" she cried.

He put on his gun belt, considered taking off his badge, then decided not to. Folsom called again, called him by name. Rail stuck his head in at the back window and started to say something, then thought better of it and went away.

A fatal necessity of manhood, however stupid. The clock ticked and he glanced at it. Nearly noon.

Folsom was leaning against the hitching post, arms folded, not exactly expectant or nonchalant but a little of each. He was a big-boned man, no longer young but not old either, covered with dust from his ride. He was lean, but not in a healthy way; in fact, he looked as if he'd shed a good deal of weight owing to his irregular life. His face, fiercely sunburned, displayed authority and refinement. It wasn't difficult to believe he really had been one of Lee's officers.

Folsom tossed his head toward the office, an impatient, dismissive gesture. "I suppose she's in there."

He nodded, unable to say it was none of the man's business.

"Well then, sir," drawled Folsom, "we'd best get it over with." There was fellow-feeling as well as weariness in his words and no hatred whatever, as if he took it for granted that they agreed what they had to be done was indeed necessary but nonetheless stupid.

Of course it was impossible, but he would have liked to talk with Folsom, even knowing they'd still have to go ahead and shoot at each other afterwards. Instead, he stepped off the duckboards into the street. They were suicidally close to each other.

They faced off for about five seconds. They drew and shot, almost simultaneously. He felt Folsom's bullet shatter his right arm and dropped his gun. Evidently untouched, Folsom still pointed his pistol, deciding whether to finish him off.

The next shot was a surprise. It came from behind, like a resounding, stunning slap from

some giant congratulating him. The blow whirled him around so that as he fell he could see her throwing down the Winchester. He heard her shout “Jake!” With his cheek pressed against the ground he watched her pink lace-up boots scurry by his face. Then there was no more breath and, despite it being noon, everything went black.

Robert Wexelblatt is professor of humanities at Boston University’s College of General Studies. He has published essays, stories, and poems in a wide variety of journals, two story collections, *Life in the Temperate Zone* and *The Decline of Our Neighborhood*, a book of essays, *Professors at Play*, and the novel *Zublinka Among Women*, winner of the First Prize for Fiction, Indie Book Awards, 2008. A new collection of stories, *The Artist Wears Rough Clothing,* is forthcoming.