

DWIGHT GARDINER / Midnight Cowboy

*For my son Mark, who also heard coughing
in the other room & stories of Pete Knight.*

Written in the early 80s.

When Pete got up and
named his horse Midnight
I wonder if he knew it
rhymed with his last name?

In fact, it was a
homonym. Nobody ever
named a horse homonym.

•

The big sky was the
same, grain elevators standing
proud against a big sky. This was Homonym,
Alberta.

•

When you rhyme you
rhyme, the horse said,

Mr. Ed, a talking
horse show, ride off into
the sunset kind of
story, with a bam
ending.

A story in which you
have to get shot in
the last chapter,

or it becomes a kind of Moby
Dick.

•

There were always a
lot of Indians around.

They seemed to belong
here. Even when they
shopped for onions they
seemed to understand
what they were doing.

Their bodies were the
same broken constructions
of human beings, and
they put themselves in
big trucks and
drove away, speaking
sounds nobody understood
and nobody knew where they
went.

•

As children we had sing
songs and played ping-pong
but we never really knew
what to do other than get
up off the floor.

Later we had chuckwagon races,
and I always won. I
was the only one
whose father had turned a red wagon
into a chuckwagon.

You have to put a lot of
things in a chuckwagon.
It shows that when you
get chased by Indians
you won't starve or
wonder where the poker
chips are.

•

When I rode in the
Calgary Stampede parade it
was hot in the chuckwagon,

and I spent a lot of time
waving and wondering where
the Indians were.

They were all out there at
Stoney, having
contests that their bones break just
like a whiteman's.

•

So Pete was a little different
from us kids in Homonym, or
Sarcee or Alberta, when
he got up. His bones were
busted just like the rest
of us but he wanted more.

•

After his body broke for
the last time, Jake
drove across the
prairies selling
surgical gloves to
Nanton nurses. The
prairies were easy to
drive, not that sad old
bronc of the past.

In Okotoks, it seemed
easy. Cowboys
like challenges,

big boxes with horns that shake
and groan against
a big dirt sky.

In Okotoks, big rock, the
Indians spoke Indian
and the sky still looked
the same.

Jake found it easy to
get up with his broken
bones. Later they would sell
tickets to drive across
the wheat to see the big
rock. The horse said

“One man’s junk is another
man’s treasure.
One man’s trash is another
man’s pleasure.”

•

With a tromboid hemorrhoid
he spoke
with a tromboid hemorrhoid.

Even the elevators looked
pained against the sky
of caged gold.

The Indians do not dream
of Nanton water until
they turn 80.

•

“Have you noticed that the
birds are no longer here?
They left last October and they
never came back.

I think it's the seed. You
remember the chickadees? They
ate treated seed and
never came back. You

look out tomorrow and
you'll see no birds.” Nothing

but crows by the medicine tree.

•

There are big black buzzards
on the outskirts of Calgary.

Maybe it's my imagination.
Maybe it's the zoo.

Bigger than a condor in heat
I have noticed the absence of
birds in High River.

The death rate is unusual.
There is always coughing

in the other room, perhaps

a tweet, a magpie, an
auctioneer, on the outskirts
of Calgary, I saw a buzzard.

•

On the range, they put
up tentpoles, one word,
and then put them in
chuckwagons. Dolly

a full-blooded Blood. Nobody
talks about the horses, horses

from Sarcee, horses from heaven.
Where did the birds go?

•

Bad seed from farmers' sons,
treated seed.

"You don't have to be from
Haiti to die," the horse said.

The horse never slept again.

•

The Huddersites came into town
in purple checkered scarves smelling
like fresh baked bread and
nobody noticed.

The farmers were standing around
watching the Indians get
into a big truck that drove
away leaving more mud than
a chuckwagon race.

The farmers were always standing
around watching the Indians buy
onions and their crops die.

Then the sky came out and
everybody forgot the grasshoppers
and why they were there.

