Flash Fiction Competition 2013

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Makin a Pretty Silver Penny Outta Fool's Gold by D. Bruton

They said as how there was gold in them thar hills and so Pa packed up his stuff and, leavin the women and kids behind, we went along with him. It was in all the papers, see, and so we was not the first there. As far as could be there was carts and tents set up, and men leanin on long-handled shovels and spittin in the dry dirt and squintin against the sun, and all of ‘em thinkin they was gonna strike lucky.

Pa warn’t there for the gold. No, sir. He warn’t no fool. He’d been young once and he’d followed the rush for gold then, and after two years his hands was calloused and his back stiff and he was poorer as a church mouse. Fool’s gold, he called it. Only, he saw an opportunity this time. Men rushin out to dig in the dirt, well they gotta eat and they need supplies and they’s easy pickins cos like as not they’s all in so much a hurry that they ain’t properly thought things through and they ain’t planned what they’s about and so they’ll be needin stuff. What Pa had packed in the cart was flour and biscuits and coffee and whisky. And pots he’d brought too, and tin cups and candy sticks and boots in all sizes, and all manner of essentials.

We was there to be his salesmen, and to be his protection against men made mad as a shook bag of snakes when there was no gold to be found and men as might look to take what was Pa’s, and Pa reckoned on makin a pretty silver penny or two out of ‘em. We all did.

Maybe a year, Pa said. Maybe a year of good pickins, just till the truth comes up and the gold that was in them thar hills just a headline in yesterday’s news. He had a little black book in his coat pocket and he made calculatin’s of how much we could make in that year – enough to see us wives and children comfortable till the next rush of fools. He never laughed at ‘em, though. He’d been where they was, so he sorta felt sorry for ‘em. Didn’t stop him chargin dear for what he had to sell ‘em. He was a businessman after all, he said, and sellin was just business. But he felt sorry for ‘em, too.

Even so, it was a hard time for us. There warn’t no baths and no home cookin and no women to keep a man warm at night and no gentle words to soften the livin that we was about. A year in that goddam place and the best that could be found was when Pa said the takins was good for that day and we could hear him countin the small silver coin into the strong box in the back of the cart where we all slept, close enough we could touch that box in us dreams.
Last of the real men by Roderick Brown

Wagons rumbled underneath a scorching sun, laden down with picks and shovels, wheels and axels groaning under the strain. A vulture sat nearby, picking a carcass clean, staring at the men who held the reins in their hands; hard bitten, grizzled men, in faded clothes, and beards that were rough enough to strike a match on. Pistols hung by the men's sides, the gleam in their eyes leaving a watcher no doubt they knew how to use them.

The wagons rumbled on, other men sat hunched in the back under the flimsy canvas cover, dealing cards or spitting out chewing tobacco. One man grabbed a chunk of buffalo meat, tearing at it with yellowed teeth. He spits the bones out contemptuously. The wagons rumble on, hitting a rut in the road, the wheel catches and the wagon falls over, the horse rears, flecks of spit foaming at its mouth, whining like a banshee, the men fall to the ground in a heap.

'Cut! Cut! Cut!'

The director runs over, sweat lashing off him, brows furrowed with weeks of worry and stress. 'How many times have I told you how to handle a wagon? That's it, I've had enough, do it again with the stuntman!'

'I've got a splinter, damn it!' bewails the actor, clutching at his hand. He stares at his hand as though it were a tentacle. 'I'm a trained Shakespearian actor! I'm not cut out for this!' That's it, I'm calling my agent!

The director stands there, hands on hips, as the agent storms over, brandishing a contract, jabbing his finger at the small print.

'It clearly stipulates in black and white the conditions my client is entitled too. Fresh coffee, served at exactly eighty degrees centigrade. An air conditioned wagon, and a bowl of Tuscan grapes in his dressing room each morning. You'll be hearing from my client's lawyers,' says the agent, storming away to dab at the actors tears with a handkerchief that is naturally made from the finest Chinese silk.

'God save me from temperamental actors,' sighs the director, over time, over budget, looking over his shoulder at the man from the studio that controls the purse strings. The director watches the cast and crew amble around, smoking cigarettes, engaging in small talk. He regrets taking this project on, wonders if it's not too late to go back to commercials. 'Whatever happened to the real men, the tough guys of the west?' He says aloud, as he wearily walks away...

THE END
Thirty-two days, fourteen hours, and seven minutes. That was how long us Wagon Boys, Hank, Pa, John-Boy, Joe, and I, had been travelin’ the endless plains in our rickety wagon searchin’ for gold. When we left home, John-Boy’s woman had given us some of her ol’ pots to cook with, but all we used them for was to hear them clankin’ along while Pa drove the wagon, to hear a little bit of home. We ate alright, really; tobacco and roadkill tided us over from settlement to settlement, where we would see if the Sherriff had any cornbread and rest the mares, but by that thirty-third day, we were hungry as dogs.

“John-Boy!” mumbled Hank, his fingers tousling his scraggly beard as his tobacco-stained teeth flashed a smile over in John-Boy’s direction. “Whaddaya want?” growled John-Boy in his grainy voice, his Southern accent blanketing his words like a thick cloud. Pots were rattlin’ as the wagon hobbled over a real nasty patch of rocks, and Hank sat up, startled out of his half-asleep state by the sheer noise in the wagon. “D’ya think we’ll be findin’ some of that gold soon?” shouted Hank, projecting his crackling voice so he would be heard over the pots. “I dunno, kid, and that’s the truth.” In that instant, the pots stopped rattlin’ and the wagon was eerily quiet again. Quiet with silence, quiet with the truth which none of us wanted to accept.

“SETTLEMENT!” Joe, the youngest and most homesick of all of us, shouted. Glee filled the wagon, smiles of joy and relief spreading across everyone’s faces. Pa whipped the mares and the wagon bumped along faster than it ever had. Within a few minutes, we had arrived at the old town. Runnin’ along, we started to realise that the town was deserted. People seemed to have been and gone, and all of our hearts sunk. “No gold here,” muttered John-Boy solemnly. But in the corner of my eye, I saw a large brown mass. My stomach growled. Could it? Could it be food? I hobbled over to the mass and picked it up, my hands shaking with the prospect that I might have found food. And it was! A ginormous, juicy, magenta ham lay cradled in my arms.

Later on, the Wagon Boys and I were spread out across our rickety wagon, bellies full and hearts content. Nothin’ in the world could have made us happier on that fine day than finding that ham and sharin’ it together, and in that moment, nothing else mattered to me. As I looked around the rattling wagon, I knew that the friends around me were worth far more than some ol’ gold. You gotta enjoy the journey, kids, in case you never get where you’re meant to be goin’.
Stone Soup by Alexander Inglis

You packed all you possessed into the wagons, your hopes, dreams, expectations for a new future; all pushed in alongside the pots and pans of day to day survival. Now, all that is left are the billycans.

Hope was your anchor but now you are in uncharted waters, your anchor dragging, the anticipation that sustained you, gone. Optimism, born of faith in a new life in the west, of work in a new world, a world where you could bring your family, was the only thing that sustained you, now all that is left is…… resignation?

How hard it is to smile in this age where machinery replaces manpower, this age where profit comes before the lives of men, but you do smile. A small spark of faith in human kindness flares inside as you watch Larry carefully remove his treasured ‘soup stone’ from his pack and drop it into the billycan. It couldn’t work again, could it?

The water boils, Larry tastes it and shakes his head, “Needs a bit of salt,” he says quietly. From somewhere a small packet of salt appears and is added to the pot. Again he tastes, “Could do with a carrot or two.” From a pack hidden in the front of the wagon someone produces a wizened apology for a carrot which he donates to Larry’s ‘stone soup’. Larry goes on tasting and suggesting improvements; a handful of barley, a piece of turnip, a couple of potatoes. Ingredients which, by themselves, would not provide much of a meal, as if by magic, appear from their hiding places in personal belongings, and are added to the communal pot.

Once, you held the reigns of industry, provided jobs and livelihoods. Now, even the reigns for the mules that pulled the wagon are beyond your grasp. All you have left of your old life is your watch and chain, a remnant which, come time, will also have to go, perhaps to provide ingredients for another pot of Larry’s ‘stone soup’.

When you left your home, like all the men with you, like all the men who have had to make this journey……a journey to nothing…. you promised your wife and the boy that as soon as you were settled you would send for them, bring them to share your new life. Can that promise ever be fulfilled?

The rich aroma of broth fills your nostrils and men from other wagons begin to drift closer, some carrying meagre contributions for the pot, others only their eating irons. Eventually Larry pronounces the soup done. “It’s amazing,” he smiles, “when everything else is gone my old soup stone can still feed us,” he looks up and chuckles. Every man there is aware of the old con, the scam to procure ingredients for the pot, but none of them complain. Perhaps, like you, they are smiling, on the inside.
The mechanical clacking of the train’s wheels came to an end. Emmett, a taciturn man with a slight limp, adjusted his ill-fitting hat as he clambered out of the carriage. As he traipsed along the lengthy dirt road into town, the sweltering heat made him sweat profusely. In the distance, the fat sun was visible above the modest houses of Emmett’s hometown. Stopping at a fork in the road, he took a swig from his hip flask. A group of five men were approaching him. He moved to greet them, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Well, hello there, Emmett!” said the biggest one, clasping his hand and grinning fiercely. “I’m Brooks. We’re out here on a mining project.” Emmett shook each one by the hand, noting miners’ hands were usually a lot more calloused.

“You’re known back where we’re from”, said Brooks.

“Yeah people are familiar with your exploits down south”, chipped in another, a short and cheery-looking man with a peculiar squint.

Emmett noticed the other three were reserved and appeared anxious. One was continually fidgeting with a button attached to his breast pocket. “Men, I can’t imagine why you’d want anything to do with me, but if you do, how about you address it to me here?”

Brooks, without slowing in pace, intoned “the business we have with you will be done at your house”, a trace of menace in his voice.

Emmett felt like a deadly snake was having its way with the insides of his stomach. As they drew nearer to his house, a powerful wind began to roar, kicking up surges of sand. He coughed violently, raising an arm to cover his mouth.

His house was in sight now. It looked well enough, although the door badly needed a coat of paint and it seemed kids had covered a few of the windows with dirt for kicks.

He didn’t bother to stop the four nameless men as they entered his house. He knew how this would end.

Brooks produced a flintlock pistol and levelled it at Emmett’s head. Emmett felt resigned to the inevitable. They were so close he could hear Brooks’ guttural breathing.

“Can I pray before...? Emmett questioned.

“Sure”, Brooks replied, with a grin that displayed all his front teeth.

Emmett turned around, knelt in the sand and closed his eyes. He had always known this moment would come but he had always felt he would be smothered by fear. Instead, he was joyous. He whispered, “I will leave this body and I only wish to see you again”.

He got up and faced Brooks. “Get in”, he barked. Emmett closed his eyes and opened the door. He then stood there, bracing himself for the impact. After several seconds he opened his eyes. The room was nearly empty. He’d been robbed. He turned around and saw Brooks was gone. Weeping
bitterly, he left the house and began the long walk to the next town. He did not try to hide his tears.
We are the survivors. The ones who escaped with our lives. Not that this is much of a life, but still, we are grateful. They came by night whilst our children were sleeping soundlessly, dreaming of adventures and fantasy worlds. They didn’t stand a chance against the cleansers. That’s the name we give to them as it’s what we believe they’re trying to do; cleanse the world of our people. They claim that by eradicating our kind they are creating a better world for everyone where there will be peace and harmony and none of this constant conflict and warfare between us and them.

Life was not by any means easy before the war broke out, but we were subsisting and surviving, that’s what counted. There wasn’t always peace; often people would fight each other for food but when resources are scarce and you have a family to feed you’ll do anything to keep them from starving. But things are worse, the cleaners want us dead and now they have our children.

There are six of us in this group; we like to keep it like that. Any bigger and resources get stretched too far. There are other groups, so we think or, at least hope. They’ll all be men too, like ours. They prefer to keep the women and children for testing as they are believed to be more susceptible to the protein and to simply kill off the men. But we won’t go down without a fight. We’re not going to let them mutate us like that.

We know the location of the plants where they keep their specimens, that is, our wives and children. But getting in is another matter altogether. In this hostile, dusty, dry environment with very little shelter and cover you stand out for miles. With 360 degree lookout towers and walls so high you’d think they’d block out the sun you are effectively an ant against an impenetrable force. But we have a plan and we are going to put it into action the minute the sun sets.

We pack our sacks full of the few belongings we have; bits of rope; several knives; some dynamite and for those of us lucky enough to have one, a few guns. It doesn’t feel like much to take on such a cult but we have to try. The dynamite’s our best bet. If we can create enough of a diversion we can maybe make a break for it. We have to be cleaver, we can’t take them on with guns blaring like the other group or we’ll all be dead in seconds, exactly like the other group.

Robbo sets up the dynamite a few metres away from the plant. Not even they have electricity in this war and so in the cover of darkness we’re invisible. The dynamite explodes with an ear splitting bang and an earth shattering rumble. Now the attack begins.
Some day you will ask about those you came from and their treeless islands of leaving. I will tell you how small boat hulls churned through pebbles, taking those leaving out to the waiting ship. A rising anchor chain shuddered hill dykes and the ship drifted through grieving skerries. Beyond the last gannet headland, seals swirled in departure’s cold shawl. They abandoned their crofts with potatoes in the ground, boats above the shore, peat un-stacked and the cold grey north trailing its wake across the world’s sea-lanes.

They were poor island people, crofting water-logged stony soil and braving sea and wind. Below the equator, ship masts scratched the scattered salt immensity of southern constellations. They came to tend other men’s sheep and wrestled from pines and birches, starling settlements armoured with psalms. Plump sheep grazed in leaning meadows, box cots creaked and hand scattered seed lifted in the ground.

Eyes prickled moist when blonde violins played familiar tunes, passionate with distance. Wives grew too old for dancing. Men remembered harvests, days at the fishing or years in the merchant navy. Death, an avenging Jarl, sauntered through their porches, spinning salt barrels and loosening clinging fish scales. Christ the shepherd, brought the lost sheep home to new graveyards and the promise of resurrection. They buried musicians with their instruments and poets with earth in their mouths, in case they disturbed the living.

The young soon left the settlements and iron ploughs rusted. In expanding towns and cities the delicate vineyard of their speech withered. In their new country many baked bread, repaired machinery, constructed houses and wooden hulled fishing boats. But a sea wind searched for those burdened by a restlessness that constantly resurfaced, as skerries break through the sea. They left the beds of migrant European and native women who dreamed of seals in their wombs. Living in dust-blown, canvas covered wagons, they laboured in harsh conditions for railway construction and logging companies and on hydro- electric schemes. Around their fires they remembered the way that ships carried lights across the sea, soft humid tropical breezes and thunderstorms building above the far horizon. Some morning before roll call, abandoning camp, they left searching through pine forests, glacial river gorges and beyond taunt serrated ridges for another sea haar coast and the fragrant assertion of ocean.

In the cities of the “promised land” they found only alienation, disillusionment and constraint. In Canada, America, Australia and New Zealand, in desert furnace and mountain snow they crossed unmapped territory and stretched the circumferences of this world. Beyond the margins of other men, in the wilderness of earth and ocean, they found their strength, meaning and dignity. For it is often that I have trailed them down the generations, that you might understand the tireless swell your name goes down. The Arctic Tern does not question its long beguiling exile. Should their days ever search for you, should a sea wind ever howl restless within you.
Dynamite by Gary Alexander Stott

Just so you know, this brief tale ends with the suicide of a cowboy named Solomon. By dynamite, of all things. And not only that – the explosion takes out all of his companions too. Pretty crazy stuff. But yeah, that’s how it all ends. Or does it? I’ll leave you to muse on that cryptic question once you’ve finished reading. Anyway, I hope you’ve enjoyed this introduction, even though it had more to do with the conclusion than anything else. Never mind, just keep going. On you go.

Flash! The men were momentarily blinded by the explosion of light which shot out from the camera, but felt a wave of relief as they shuffled into more natural poses. Solomon was dimly aware of the photographs being taken outside, but had been too preoccupied to take part. Instead, he had withdrawn into the wagon to process his thoughts. His mood had been quite introspective as of late, much to the concern of his companions. This was a direct result of coming to realize that he was a fictional character. And a fairly clichéd one, at that.

Of course, Solomon’s behaviour had changed somewhat following this grand epiphany. Formerly, he had been a brave, heroic soul, proudly riding from saloon to saloon, battling with villainy along the way in a mostly futile attempt to bring order to the world he lived in. Now, he was more on par with Kurt Cobain – and as Kurt Cobain had yet to be born in Solomon’s time, he had actually become quite original as a consequence. But regardless, he was very troubled. In fact, ‘troubled’ might be something of an understatement. ‘In a state of intense metaphysical and existential confusion’ perhaps does better justice to poor Solomon.

He struggled to answer questions such as ‘why do I exist?’, ‘what is my purpose?’ and ‘is anything real?’, as well he should. I mean, if we’re going to get technical about this, can fictional characters even be said to be alive? Solomon had conflicting ideas on this topic. For one, he had experience, memories, and awareness. That sounded like life, didn’t it? On the other end of the spectrum – could he die? Even assuming his death were written and confirmed – which we know it is – wouldn’t he always exist as a living character with thoughts and feelings, too? He would exist in the minds of readers too, wouldn’t he? That said, what if they forgot about him? What then?

The whole thing was simply too much for him to deal with, so he formed a plan. An act of defiance against his creator and against his existence. His companions would be affected too, but given his grand self-awareness, this little issue didn’t bother him too much. From inside the wagon, Solomon picked up a stick of dynamite - how’s that for a cliché, huh? - and set fire to the fuse. And with another Flash!, this brief tale ends as it began.
The flames licked the wooden post of the stables. The charred wooden column collapsed inwards as the ravaging conflagration spread. The town hall was next to crumble. The flames ate the houses and market stalls, mercilessly tearing the growing town into nothing, but the ashes of what was previously a bustling hub of commerce and activity. The ashes of the town were swept away with the wind, giant columns of smoke towering through the cloudless night. Soon, hundreds of people, with soot on their faces stood in the center of what was once, their pride and glory.

“What shall we do now?” asked a young cowboy in his mid twenties.

“We head somewhere else,” said an old, raspy voice. A murmur of astonishment and disbelief arose amongst the crowd of people. “I see no other choice,” said the raspy voice. The old man parted the crowd and went towards his horse. After a brief moment of shock, many people followed his idea, and all through the night people saddled their horses and left, they were going to various places, some, even beyond Coyote Canyon. The hubbub of excitement lasted all through the night, as the dark morphed into the rising sun, three people remained: the young man, and two others.

“What to?” asked one of others, he had a limp, yet no one ever knew why.

“I don’t know about y’all, but I’m heading to River Hills. Rumors say that it’s a large town with many prospects for people like us.” Replied the young cowboy. River Hills was another town, similar to their home but larger. River Hills was nearby, but they had to cross the Blackhawk Wastes. It was an inhospitable region with storms of dust and sand happening every other day. The young cowboy left the two others to decide their fate as he slowly trotted his horse away. The other two men looked each other in the eye and had the same decision.

The sound of hooves hitting the arid wastelands was the only thing that could be heard for miles. The wind was against them as they rode in a single file. The terrain was the same everywhere: cracked earth with cacti sprouting out of the earth occasionally. There was a blanket of dust sweeping across the Blackhawk Wastes for what seemed like eternity. They trotted their horses along the arid stretch of land; passing arches of red rock, and deep ravines.

As day became night and night became day, the party arose after a harsh night. The sandstorm struck them at night, and like glass shards, sand pierced through the flimsy canvas that acted as their makeshift tent. They carried on and encountered a slope in the landscape. They went up it and at the top of the cliff, made out something in the distance. Like an oasis, a town stood, made of wood, hopes and dreams. They had reached a new beginning.

“Gentlemen,” The young man said slowly, “I present to y’all, River Hills.”
MAHESH works seven days a week in an Indian takeaway. As a full-time student, he is entitled to work for twenty hours. However, he has set up a deal with his boss to work for less wage and more hours. We share a two bedroom flat. He gets up early in the morning. I hear his yawn. The thud of his heavy footsteps on the wooden floor annoys me. The floorboard creaks. He goes straight to the bathroom. He opens the tap. I hear the sound of running water. He sits down on the toilet basin. As though, he has hernia, he loves sitting there. Perhaps he takes a short nap. After half an hour, with the tap still open, he brushes his teeth. He gargles. Not like a civilized gargle as one would expect of a gentleman. A wild, roller-coaster ride of water. And then he spits. Thuuuuuuuuuuuuu. I am sure our neighbours hear him. He applies foam on his stubble. The water tap is still open. The faucet is barely a foot away but he never closes it.

I remember the television advertisement. He has also seen it. It shows an emaciated girl child somewhere in Africa. Flies sit on her nose. Her face caked with layers of dried snots. She takes a weather-beaten, yellow jerrycan and travels miles to fetch water. Finally she sees a small pond. A herd of buffaloes are inside it. Near the pond, which is almost at the stage of drying, a parched serrated landscape of red earth follows. She dips the jerrycan into the pond and takes out water. It is brown, slimy and thick. She drinks it by cupping with her one hand and pouring with the other. She takes the water home to her family.

Water! Water! Water!

I have told Mahesh about the scarcity of water. He sees the advertisement every day. He says, ‘That is just for charity. They want to pull money from the West. More than half of the whole world is submerged in water. Science says there are ¼ portion of water and ¾ portion of land.’ I do not argue. The day begins. He goes to work. I go to work. Next morning, I hear the same yawn, heavy feet thudding towards the bathroom, the same wild gurgle. His branded Thuaaaaaaaaa. I could have adjusted all that. But, when I hear the sound of the water going down into the sink with nothing washed, my blood-pressure soars. I feel like sending him to Africa, even for a day, to live with the girl’s family who appears on the television screen every day.
Last Letter by Zoe Coutts

2nd May 1958

Dear Mr Gernsheim,

I first wish to express how your correspondence has cheered me these past years. As I am now ninety-three, I am practically confined to my home, and have almost lost the power of eyesight. Other deficiencies continue to ail me.

What I have to write relates to a photograph (enclosed) that I found among some old letters. As you may remember, I donated my entire collection to the Aberdeen Public Library. You can imagine my surprise when I found one had become separated from the rest. It is not one of my father’s, but one of my own, taken in the Transvaal in 1886 after the end of the wet-collodion process.

My memory is not what it was, yet when I discovered this photograph, a great array of people and places floated through my mind. We were travelling towards what is now Johannesburg and encountered a group of Boers outspanning.

We had met many Boers on our travels and they were fine men, but, on the whole, proud and reluctant to stand for portraits! This particular group, however, welcomed us with nothing but good feeling. The “leader” of the pack was a man named Andries, after the famous Pretorius. You see him standing in the photograph.

Andries and his men were taking the opposite route from us: they were for Natal, the very region from which we had departed. This was a great surprise to us for many were destined for the gold of the Witwatersrand. I asked Andries why he was fleeing the chance of such prosperity. He said that the growing uitlander population threatened the Boer government and soon there would be a war. He and his men sought only safety and means by which to live. I berated him for such a cynical view: I was young and foolish.

We adjoined camps for the night and I talked with Andries through the wee hours. He spoke of his faith and explained that his people saw war as a religious duty, a necessary sacrifice for the greater good. He and his five companions did not conform to this belief. “Nothing comes of war but death and regret,” he said. “We may be alone but we do not die tomorrow.” The next day, I persuaded the group to pose for a photograph. We parted ways and never again saw one another.

My dear Gernsheim, you may wonder what to gain from this screed. These past years I have felt my body decay and thought the end near. When I once again saw the face of Andries, I was filled with such defiance and such hope that a man may choose his own path, may live through any hardship. I have sent you the photograph that you may look on it and think of me not with pity but with faith.

Please tender my warmest wishes to Mrs Gernsheim and meantime I remain
Yours sincerely
Charles A. Wilson
Dan McGrew stood behind the camera, growing more agitated by the second. ‘Huck, ya li’l creep, why don’tcha come on out so you’re in the picture?’

The surly gambler made his ‘okay, but I don’t like this’ grunt, and leaned forward onto the wagon’s creaky back bar. ‘This alright Dan?’ he cooed, lowering his face to mutter the rest of his sentence privately.

‘That’s great Huck,’ replied Dan, turning his head to clear his throat with a curse. ‘Say, Billy, could ya just hunker down a bit? It looks like you’re wearing George’s head as a second hat.’

Billy squatted further down. ‘Make it quick Dan, this here pot I’m sat on is hotter than moonshine throw-up!’

As he felt his undercarriage cooking, Billy considered the future. He thought of his sweet young bride, Marianne, and of the life he could show her if they found the big win they were out there for. ‘First thing I’ll do,’ he thought, ‘is buy her that purty blue dress she had her eye on. I don’t care much for that giblet McGonnae the tailor, but I guess it ain’t the end of the world to line his pockets, if it makes my girl smile.’

Behind him, George jostled for position, peering over the young man’s hat. This wasn’t his first expedition, but he prayed it would be his last. Moreover, he prayed for the group to make it back home safe. Mostly, however, he prayed for Charlie to stop twisting this way and that with his elbows outstretched; he wouldn’t be held accountable for the consequences if his hat got knocked off his head once more.

As if in answer to George’s prayers, Charlie shuffled to the left, still rigidly poised with his hands on his hips.

‘Y’know,’ offered Wilber, his legs swinging from the wagon floor, ‘this whole trip’d be a lot easier if we had one of them doohickeys that Scotch fellar invented, what ta find the bullet in the president?’ He looked expectantly at the others, a chorus of blank faces.

‘Wilber,’ Dan called, ‘if ya promise to stop swinging them darned legs o’ yours til I take this picture, I’ll vote for you to be the next president.’

Jim laughed and turned to face Wilber. Dan rested his weary eyes against his palm. ‘Wilber, you maniac,’ wheezed Jim, ‘if you were president, I’m sure you’d get a lot of time with the Scotch fellar’s invention, alright.’

They all laughed, with the exception of Dan. ‘Right boys, it’s now or never,’ he sighed. They all turned obediently to face him. Billy’s thoughts turned once more to Marianne; as did Huck’s, George’s, Wilber’s, and Jim’s. Charlie flexed his elbows, thinking about statues. Dan vengefully clicked on his contraption, then stood back. ‘That’s it!’ he chimed.

Billy shot to his feet, frantically rubbing his behind. Dan started dismantling his array. Charlie stood, apparently unwilling to abandon his role as a statue.
The rest stayed seated, still thinking about Marianne.
The Inevitability of Rock by Katie Forrester

Intrusive miners dig up the hot red dust of the Arizona desert in their tenacious search for the mythical mineral that spits back the sun’s rays scornfully in their eyes. Hundreds of men of all ages and races simultaneously chip at the near impenetrable armour of sedimentary rock in which the land protects its precious veins of gold. When we first got here—to Vulture Mine—there was camaraderie, all of us, even the Mexican ex-bandits had pitched in, feverish for evidence of the rumours heralding a northern Eldorado.

Things change with the wind. The five of us scoundrels you just took that picture of, we get called lazy but actually, we’re just doing the same thing as those gold-hounds—looking out for ourselves—only we are more clever. Miners all get the same wage and the foreman takes all the gold, what does it matter if a few of us let the others take some of our slack? We eat away from the camp and make excuses for extensive meal times such as pretending to be preparing the tea, looking for water or some other measly errand no one wants to do. This way, no one notices that we sit out of the midday sun for lengthy times and have first pickings of the ever-worsening excuses for rations. On a good day we get coffee beans, on a bad, something that looks like the traders ripped cedar bark right from the trees on the way over here from the town.

When we stop work we all celebrate with a swig of Jer’s home-brewed 'bourbon.' It’s got a kick and that’s all we care; takes the edge off the day. It takes the edge off Tulio’s constant whistling too. As if chipping away at rock for twelve hours a day isn’t tedious enough, the piping tune mediates the tick-tack, tick-tack of at least a hundred little iron hammers against discordant rock. The noise still rings in my ears as I try to sleep on the ground, the heat it charged from the sun quickly dissipating. Every
aspect of our lives out here in the desert requires contact with life-consuming rock, which sedimented, fused and was forced up above the crust to meet the burning light of day, millions of years before man set foot on God's red earth. Sometimes, when I do have to show my face in the trench of Vulture mine, I crack a chunk of mineral open and inside is a truly natural beauty: an ammonite. A life entombed in rock, enabled to exist through a trade of substances, bargaining its way ignorantly from birth to inevitable death. What is temporal is relinquished back to the earth in quietus, just as we colonisers ignorantly dig for gold to trade, all we own will be surrendered to the soil. But it's all we know now, here. It's all-consuming. It's the gold rush. At least we can trade it for coffee beans.
The industrial wave is sweeping across America, engulfing pastoral lands and traditions that were so carefully preserved and cultivated, and leaving in its vast wake, scarred stretches of earth, and vitiated ideals of prosperity. Man is further evolving; machine has superseded the dog; and the honest hands of graft are being replaced by the rigour of mechanized efficiency. This is a revolution, though incipient at present. And in order to flourish, one must swim with the tide into that of the unchartered, or risk being fettered to the foundering customs of the antiquated.

This band of peregrine creatures had been sent from their humble communities to dig for a share of the distributive wealth contained in the west. With empty pockets, a vague sense of direction, and a thick air of credulity, they jauntily set off, with the grand prospect of returning to their families prodigiously rich. Aptly prepared...well with a wagon carrying the victuals, and a horse or two to haul it, the group journey dauntlessly into the unexplored territory beyond their little ranches.

The mood was of convivial camaraderie upon reaching the barren expanse of New Mexico. The group’s course had converged with that of some kindred competitors -about a hundred or so, and they had been traveling as a throng of pilgrims through the rather verdant planes of Oklahoma. As they were warned of potential attacks from the natives of the lands, they felt safer in the large company of their own, and when they reach the desert terrain, they decided to venture independently. Though weeks past, and each day the pack continued to lumber towards the horizon of a lonely sun, with no vestige of a trail to Gold. The air was terribly dry in the immense heat and quickly parched the throat. Their feet wore the wounds of blisters and sores, and their necks suffered under the severity of the unrelenting rays. A silence was held among them; the kind of silence sustained by weary thought and sundered spirit. Gold was proving to be more elusive than rain. Fever was threatening with the scorching days and chilly nights, and the water stores were showing dangerous signs of depleting. Such were their stringent rationings; the pangs of hunger further clouded their mind and judgement. The memories of ranch life were frequently revisited.

One of the men was carrying grass seeds in his pocket. Disillusioned with the interminable trek, longing for a sight of vegetation, and suddenly inspired by the legend of Appleseed, he passionately persuades his companions to abandon their mission, and turn for home. After a tired quarrel, the group decide to turn and head home, intermittently planting seeds of grass in various locations. Upon reaching Oklahoma, they drink in the breezy air and rhapsodize about the inherent beauty of green grass.