

# RHIDO WARS

**Neal Barrett, Jr.**

**From "Red Shift" edited and introduced  
by Al Sarrantonio**

*I first met Neal Barrett, Jr., face-to-face in the fall of 2000. This is incredible because (a) I feel like I've known him forever and (b) I was Neal Barrett, Jr., for a short period of time in 1995.*

*Here's what happened: in the autumn of '95, when I was starting to look forward to Thanksgiving, Neal's agent called and asked if I'd be interested in taking a project over for him—seems he was just too popular and was overbooked (that's a pun) with work. The project in question was a Babylon 5 novelization titled "The Touch of Your Shadow, The Whisper of Your Name", and all that existed for it was a ten-page outline that Neal had written. Another problem was that the book had to be turned in around Thanksgiving. And yet another problem was that the publisher had already printed up the cover with Neal's name on it—which meant that I had to become Neal Barrett! Horrors!*

*Suffice it to say, Neal got his revenge for what I've just written—by producing an absolutely drop-dead great story to end this book.*

*In actuality: if only the rest of you could be Neal Barrett, Jr., for a while, what an honor that would be. I commend to your astonishment, besides "Rhido Wars," the following: "The Hereafter Gang", "Pink Vodka Blues", "Through Darkest America", and the remarkable story collection "Perpetuity Blues."*

What I do I hear this fart an a squirt an a squirt after that an then splat. Dont hardly have to wake up Im seein this big red ass with a bright blue ring round the hole where the shits comin out. He squattin maybe thirty hands off an it isnt even Light an I know its Sal Capone. You dont gotta see a face, you can see that ass, isnt any two alike. Drills are like

Persons. Persons dont look or smell the same. Ever things different from ever thing else.

Sal, he knowin I there, an when he all done he turn an blink his baby crap eyes. The stripes on his face is black stead of blue cause theres hardly any Light.

Sal, he not wearin nothin, not wearin anything at all. Ever thin showin, hangin, stuff stickin out. A Drill dont care bout that. Only thing he care bout, he gotta have a hat.

"You are not being sleep," Sal says. "Dark is for the sleep. Persons must sleep in the Dark and working in the Light."

*I was sleepin good, Im thinkin, then you com an shit in my yard. Im not sleepin real good after that ....*

"The rain fell much in the forest last Dark," Sal says, the way they all do, like they got a sack of gravel in their craw. "The ground is being wet. Seven baskets for each of your Persons, seven by the time the sun is high. *Nine* for you, Ratch, for you are ever insolent to me. I am angered and sad that you show me disrespect, this is great sorrow and a bad thing to do.

"Be telling your Persons, a basket will not be padded with little leaves and shoots to seem full when it is not. There will be sufficient beetles and snails. Snails will be about on a wetting day as this. There will also be the grubs, Ratch, grubs of most sufficient fat.

"I should like to see voles. Not voles that are deceased, eaten by the ant. Voles are not difficult to catch. Young Lily is quick. Tell her to catch me many voles, I shall bring her honey on a stick. How is the Lily, Ratch? She is well, I am hope. And little Macky and Dit? And the one who is bit by a snik?"

"He fine too. Hows Florence an Sil? How Miz Pain?" "You will see that there are voles, Ratch. Voles are expected. Grasses are not."

Sal was all done. A Drill say what he got to say, thats it, he done. While they talkin an scratchin an pluckin some crawly out their fur, you maybe okay. A Drill just lookin, lookin right at you with baby crap eyes, he got some ugly in mind.

A Drills flat ugly outside, but insides uglyern that. You dont know bout ugly till you know whats in a Drills head....

Its so phuckin hot you are drownin in sweat you are poundin in the head. Ever skeeto ever nat for a thousan miles aroun is crawlin in your eyes is crawlin up your ass. The sun is up but the trees has smothered all the Light. Its Light somewhere but it isnt down here. You haven ever crawl through creepers an tanglers wrappin roun a tree, you dont know what I talkin bout here. Im talkin trees you cant even see roun, trees got snicks an stingers so big you dont want to think what maybe lookin at you there.

Im crawlin onna ground, Im turnin over rocks, I cant see dick for a phuckin foot ahead. I got a couple snails, I got a buncha grubs. Down here theres ever kinda of bug there is. Down here you a bug or a leaf. Maybe you a root. Ever thing down here squishy, ever thing wet, ever thing tangled in ever thing else. Ever thing fat bout to busting down here, an ever thing one phuckin color, ever *thing green*.

I hear Lily she off somewhere, Lily chasin voles. Dont hear Macky, an you hardly never do. Macky, he gonna spook you sometime, Macky dont make a sound at all.

Cant say that bout Dit. Know where Dit goin to be bout a hour fore he is.

A whole lotta green start shakin an here come Dit. Dit grinnin like a fool an he got a bunch of orchits in his hair. Some of em pink and some of em white, some of em colors hasnt got a name at all.

"I was you," I says, "I wouldnt let Darc Anthony see me lookin like that. Darc he likely to haul you off inna bush somewhere."

"Darc cant see no further than he nose," Dit says. "Darc isnt goin to see me."

Darc cant see real good, but Darc can smell nats phuckin half a mile away. Isnt no use telling Dit, Dit dont listen to anyone at all.

"I got some real fine grubs," Dit says, "they sweet as they can be. Been down in the dirt, hasnt ever seen the Light."

He doin that mouth-smackin shit, he holdin a grub, it squirmin an twitchin like it know what Dit goin to do. Dit hold it up bout a inch from

his lips an his cheeks get holler an he suck it right in. Dit says this is a trick. What it is is somethin anyone could do, but Dit think he made it up his self.

He gets me a grub an another for his self an I dont say a thing bout this. His baskets are full, an even Sal Capone wont know if theres any gone or what.

"You see Macky," I tell him, "say he got enough snails hes to go help Lily, see if he can help her catch voles. Sals set up bout somethin. I dont know what. I dont want no trouble, so get him lots a voles."

"Set up bout what, Sal is?"

"If I know, then thats what I be sayin, now wouldnt I, Dit?"

"I guess."

"Guess I would. Listen to me good, all right? When I be talkin, listen to what I got to say."

I eat another grub, an put a couple more in my cheek for later on.

"Dont eat no more," I tell Dit. "Dont think bout grubs, go think about snails. Get some more snails."

"Dont like them snails. Dont like em at all."

"Now you got it, Dit, get you ass movin, find a buncha snails..."

Lily bout where I figured she be. Theres a place where chokegrass growin so high you cant see over it at all. Crawl on in theres a hollow where Light sneaks down an make goldy spots on the ground. You look at them spots an they shiver an blur an you look real long, you off somewhere, not where you think you be.

Thats where Lily is, sittin in greeny moss, sittin by the creek. She lookin awful pretty, lookin awful good. I feelin somethin funny, cause she not wearin nothin which she never do at home.

The goldys is dancing in her hair, dancing off her legs which she dippin in the creek, dancing of her little buds which is poppin out fine.

Shes found her some cappers, holdin the stems in her fingers an chewin off the tops, eatin real slow. Lily dont eat like other folks, Lily eats nice. Takin little bites like you see a critter do. I can see Mama doin that, cept Lily wouldn't know, she wouldnt member that.

I sit there watchin, which I hadnt ought to do. Its hard not to, cause a sister dont look no different than someone you isnt kin to. If you didnt know you was, youd be thinking what I was thinking too.

"You goin to sit there, Ratch, you going to take root an turn into a tree..."

I glad she isnt lookin, if she was shed of seen me turnin a couple shades of red.

"Didnt want to scare you or nothin," I tell her, "just jumpin out a bush. Wouldnt want to do that."

Lily laugh an she do turn then, givin me a smile an her sparkle-dark eyes.

"What you talkin bout, Ratch? You couldnt scare me if you tried."

"I could, I bet. I could if I tried."

"Huh-uh, you couldn't scare me. I doubt you could even scare Macky. You might scare Dit."

"Anyone could scare Dit. A leaf could scare Dit. I bet a-a *rock* could scare ol Dit."

Lily laugh at that. She pats a place beside her an splashes her feet in the water, an I dippin mine in too. Mine are all big an crookity lookin an hers are real small. Mens an wimins are different. An it isnt just feet I talkin bout.

I try not to look at those buds. A little bit of fuzz is growin round her cut an I try not to look at that too. Even though I wearin a clothes, I fraid she might see what I tryin not to do.

"I sent Macky over, I bet he didnt come," I tell her. "I said, Dit, you tell Macky go on over an help Lily catch a buncha voles. What I bet, he didnt show at all."

"Course he didnt. You think he would?"

"I dont guess. I always thinkin, I thinkin, Ratch, why you go an open your mouth, why you say somethin it dont do any good?"

"You tryin is why," Lily says. "That's just the way you do. The way you always been."

She lookin at me then an I got to look away, got to look at somethin else. Lacers and brighters are buzzin in a beam a goldy Light. A dragun-wings dippin down quick, kissin the water an flyin on away.

"I got to be like I am, Lily. Im oldest. Its what I got to do."

"I know you do, Ratch..."

"You an older, you lookin after Famly, thats what you got to do. I gotta watch Macky, I gotta watch Dit, he dont do somethin dumb. Spose he get in his head he gonna eat all his grubs? What I gonna tell Sal, Dits maybe doin that?"

"I dont think he will."

"You dont but I do. Thats what I gotta be thinkin alla time. An Macky, hes spose to help you findin voles. Whats Macky doin, what he doin now? What if you not findin voles, what Sal goin to say bout that?"

"Ratch..."

"What?"

"I got Sals ol voles, all right?"

She turn an look at me then, look at me real soft like.

"You worry bout me, Ratch, an I dont want you doing that."

"Course I do, Lily. Nothin wrong with that."

"There isnt, not if you worry the ordinary way. Not if you worryin right..."

I see right off what she talkin bout now. She look away quick an I look away too, cause I know she scared she thinkin just the way I thinking too.

I tell her I got to find Macky, I tell her I got to find Dit. See if Niks swellin has gone down where he got bit.

Im out through the chokegrass, outta there quick. Lily dont watch an Im not lookin back. I forget to give her the grub I savin in my cheek. I go head an chew it, an swallow it myself. It dont taste good like the other one did...

Stay down low, not movin at all. Darc Anthony cant see shit, Dits right bout that. But there isnt nothing wrong with the ol bastards ears, he can phuckin *hear*, isnt no doubt a that.

Isnt no tellin how ol Darc is. Even if you know em, you cant never tell. Ever Drill got baby crap eyes an that ugly red muzzle pokin out. Ever one got cheeks like puckerin scars-like someone cut em, then go an paint em blue. Sometime a cheek bein purple stead of blue. Sometime they ruffs bein yellow, sometime they dirty white.

Darc I figure is oldern Sal. He isnt too ol cause he sniffin round Florence of Arabia when Sal not around. Sal likely kill him if he know bout that.

Darc, he squat there ever single day, squattin on his big black rock. Squats an shits and scratches, squats an shits again. Picks little clutters off his fur an cracks em in his teeth. Sometime he play with that big pink knobber sticltin tween his legs. You see a Drill got nothin else to do, he likely doin that. Likely doin that, or lookin for a hat.

What you dont know, is while he doin that, Darc Anthony knowin where every picker is in the tangle, in the hot, in the strangle down below. What they doin down there, what they pickin, if they workin or they takin a nap. An when the days done, ol Darc tellin Sal what he seen, tellin Sal what he know.

Tellin, or keepin somethin to his self. Waitin till he got somethin good he can use on someone hadnt got sense. Someone like Dit. Then Dit got to do what Darc want him to, an wonder how he got into somethin like that.

How he did, is he dont ever listen to Ratch. Ratch spend ever minute helpin Family, keepin ever body right. I do the best I can. Someone dont listen, what am I sposed to do? ...

Niks a lot worse. He burnin with fever he all swole up. A green snik got him, an theres nothing worsen that. He not goin to make it through the night. Lily know that, but she wont give up. She keepin him cool, wipin him off, drippin water on his mouth. His lips is dry as dirt. His eyes is open, but Nik not lookin at any thing at all.

"Hes little, Ratch. He isnt hardly six. He hadnt ought to leave, you little like that."

"Little dont matter to a snik," I tell her. "A snik dont care if you six. Dont care if you seven, dont care if you ten."

"You shouldnt oughta, though. Not if you six."

"Thats what happen, Lily. You go whenever you go."

"I guess..."

I had a fire goin, nothin real big, moss an dry sticks. You not spose to, you spose to be sleepin if its Dark. Phuck it if a Drill dont like it, Little Nik goin to have a fire tonight.

Macky an Dit is sleepin in the corner of the hooch. Both of em oldern Nik, an Lily short of me. A couple of years, they start thinkin important stuff too. They will, if they dont do somethin real dumb or get bit. Lilys already smart as she can be. Wimin get smarter fastern mens. Dont know why they just do.

"Im awful sleepy," Lily says. "I dont know I can stay awake, Ratch."

"You dont have to," I tell her, "I can do that, I can watch Nik."

"You go to sleep is what you gonna do."

"I wont neither. I be watchin little Nik."

"You vow that you will?"

"I vow, now get to sleep, here?"



So she did. I did too, bout a minute after that. Didnt matter if we didnt or we did. Not to Little Nik. I waked up once an we were touchin one another, sleepin real close. Didnt do nothin, but I know she was wake a while too.

Somewhere close to Light, when the grays comin in, Lily she sit up straight, sit up shakin, making funny little sounds. I sittin up cause I hear it too, comin in soft, comin on the wind. Snortin an gruntin, shufflin about. Bumpin and pushin, stompin on the ground. Movin like they real uneasy, like somethin stir em up. Closer, too, closern they been for a spell.

"Down in the draw," I say, "down past the trees."

Dont hardly whisper, but ever body hear. No one got to tell Lily, or Macky or Dit. Ever Person, ever Famly, awake right now. Isnt no one sleepin with Rhido out there...

I reach out and take Lilys hand. Its freezin cold, like water from a spring, from way down deep somewhere.

"What they doin, Ratch, what they doin here?"

"I dont know that, Lily. Might be somebody tell us come Light. Might be we know then."

"Im kinda scared. You scared too?"

"Nothin to be scared of, far as I can see. You try an sleep now. You boys too."

Macky and Dit turn over, they eyes real bright in the last of the fire. Lily look at me, like she want me to talk for a while. I make like I sleepin. Dont wont to tell her I dont know nothin more to say...

Isnt no sleepin after that, dont anybody try. Little Niks gone. Lily get him clean an I take him outside. Macky got the fire back up, Dit got us fruit an some grubs he hid from Sal.

Nobody talkin bout Rhidos or Nik or bout anything else. Talkin dont do no good. Ever day I tell Dit an Macky that. Somethin is or somethin not. Lily dont ask me nothin, even if she wantin to.

After I eat I go out an have a look. Sackers there cross the way, standin by his Famlys hooch too. I dont like him an he dont like me. Still, he know somethin goin on, same as I do.

I hear gruntin and fartin an such, an fat Mama Gass come lopin down the draw, bouncin an swayin, fatter she was the week before. Florence of Arabias right on her tail, dirty brown hair standin up on her back, muddy little eyes shiftin this way an that. Both of em wearin floppy hats with flowers stickin out.

Florence dont like me too much. She wrinkle up her muzzle, givin me a growl. I dont pay her no mind. Go back in, toss a stick on the fire, do somethin busy, walk out again. Watch the sun swellin through the trees. Macky an Dit wander out back to pee.

I know Lily, know what she thinkin in there. Long as she dont come see Little Niks not there, in her head he maybe is.

Wimin dont think the same as mens. Ever ones different from ever one else...

If I hadnt shit already bet I likely would. Sal keep us wiitin a hour in the sun, an that mean somethins not good. Cant be nothin youd ever want to know. Not after what we hearin, out there in the Dark.

An when I see Sal lopin up the draw, I know its goin to be awful, know its worsen that. The parts I not tellin Lily are bustin in my head, an my mouth tastin bad. I look at Sacker, an Sacker look sickern me.

Sals got a good stout pole, sharpened on the end. Got slabs of scrap-wood strapped to his forelegs, strapped to his shoulders, strapped to his chest. Ever piece he wearin got circles and jaggeds painted yellor an red. Got somethin on his head. Looks like a turtul with the innards scooped out. Looks like that, cause thats what it is.

"Persons is listening good," Sal Capone says, "persons is very much hearing what I be saying now. Anyone is not listen good, is in extreme trouble and this is not good."

With this, he pounds that stick on the ground, looks at ever hooch, looks

at Sacker, Mockit, an Brig, looks right at me.

"There will be no picking of foods this day. No one shall gather the kindles, no one is lifting the rocks or the stones. All Persons shall be leaving this place in orderly manners when the sun is going down. You will gather your stuffs and leave nothing behind. You will do as you are told. You will be starting this now."

Sals got nothing more to say. He turns an totters back down the draw, back to the shade. The turtul hat bounces on his head. Two hunks of wood are strapped to fit his humpy back. The wood is painted in loopy swirls of white. His asshole is ugly, purple, blue, and red.

I talk to Mockit after Sals gone. Mockits Famly is two hooches down, an he bout as old as me. Mockit wants Lily, an wants to give me Dandra Bee. Mockit dont know it, but nothins ever goin to come of that.

"I heared em," Mockit tells me, "ever one did. Bicky an Dandra is real upset. The little uns is climbin up the walls. I sorry bout Nik. Pock, he lost a gurl to a big sinnerpede." "Didnt know that."

"That was bout a week. No, it was some moren that." Mockit looks past me to see if anyones there.

"Pock, he takes stuff down the hill. Goes right in the fort, he got a pretty a Drill might give him somethin for. He comin back late, he seen em down there."

"Seen what you an me talkin bout here."

"Rhidos. Real close by."

"Shit, I know that."

"He say a thousan, maybe a milyun, hard to see em in the Dark. Pock say they smellin, say they smellin real bad."

"Dont want to smell em. Smelled em onct before."

Mockit shakes his head. "That isnt what Pock sayin. Not that kinda smell. Pock says mad. Pock say they smellin red, like they got some kinda crazy in they heads."

"I never heard bout smellin crazy, nothin like that."

"I just sayin what he says. What you think, Ratch? What they goin to do?"

"Rhidos here, Drills wearin shit like that? What you think it goin to be?"

Mockit looks away. "Ratch, I dont want it bein that."

"Good. Then maybe it be somethin different. You dont want it to, it likely be somethin else."

I go on back, leave Mockit standin there. No use talkin, cause...

Mockit think like a chile sometime. A chile dont like to member nothin less its somethin good.

I member an so does he. I wasnt biggern Nik, but its clear as yesterday. Somethin like that, its not about to go away...

It dont take long to "gather our stuffs" like Sal Capone say. Drills, they gotta lot of stuff. Persons dont hardly have any stuff at all. What Persons do is carry stuff a Drill dont like to be haulin round they selves. Which is ever thing but they dicks an they hats.

First night out, it isnt too bad. We walkin in the Dark, an we fresh, cause we dont have to work till we startin on the trail. We walk through the forest till it start thinnin out, an the land rise up to grassy hills. I been this far onct before. Haulin rock back fore they got me pickin bugs. Lily an the boys hasnt seen a lotta open, an they actin kinda scared.

"Its all right," I tell em, "it just like anyplace else."

"No it isnt, Ratch," Macky says.

"Why you sayin it is when its not?"

"Dont talk back to me," I tell him, "you know better, boy." What else I goin to say? What else I goin to tell him cept he right about that?

Isnt just Macky an Lily and Dit. Lots of the younguns is whinin, an some of the older Persons too. Drills start lopin down the line, snappin they teeth, telling us we better keep em quiet, or you know what they goin to do.

I know what botherin the Drills, what make em shaky too. We cant see no Rhidos, but we surely know they there. You can hear em clear, an they not far away.

An that be somethin I member in my head. Rhidos dont like Persons. Dont like the way we smell, any moren we like the stink of them.

We only stoppin onct in the Dark. We thirsty, dont got nothin to eat. What a Person do, you eat what you got, find somethin else next Light. Only we not home now, we somewhere else. Nobody think bout carryin water or somethin to eat. Isnt what we do, so nobody did.

Mockits grumblin, sayin how we oughta tell the Drills give us somethin to eat. They got plenty, they can give us some of theirs.

"Drop it," I tell him, "hush up. Get us all in plenty phuckin trouble, you start talkin like that."

Mockit mutterin some, but he keep his complainin to his self. You gotta think fore you talk. Im always tellin Dit and Macky that.

The good part is, we can rest for a while. Ever body needin that. Up in the hills theres a cool wind blows in the Dark. It dont in the Light, but its nice in the Dark.

The boys is sleepin, an me an Lily is lookin at the brights. The brights an the moon is the biggest wonders ever is. The moon an the brights an specially the sun.

You can hear the Rhidos, shiftin and gruntin, some of em squealin sometimes. Moren onct, I seen a Drill go careful down there, not makin any sound at all. I seen em comin back an talkin with the rest. They not real happy, whatever they doin down there.

"We goin back, you think," Lily says, lookin up in the Dark, lookin at the brights. "I dont like it, Ratch. I like it home, dont like it out here."

Im glad its Dark, so Lily cant see me too good. Been thinkin what to say, what to tell her and Macky and Dit. Dont like em think I dont know ever thing, the Famly they countin on me.

Only, I dont know a lot moren them. Me and Mockit an the olders, wasnt much bigger than the younguns is now.

It happened.

It wasnt good, an it was somethin like this.

Somethin like this, and there wasn't any Mamas, wasnt hardly anyone bigger after that.

"Dont want you thinkin bout goin back, Lily, least not yet. I think they keep on goin for a while."

"Why, Ratch? Why they want to do that? Where they want to be?" Even in Dark, I can see a little scared in her eyes, in the way she move her mouth.

*Somethin happen, Lily. Somethin fore you, somethin barely after me, an you dont want to hear bout that...*

Lily does a little sniff. "You mad with me, Ratch? I dont want you doin that."

"Im not mad at you, Lily."

"Good. I dont want you to."

"There isnt no way I ever could. You gotta know that, least I hope you do."

"I do, Ratch. I surely do..."

Near Light, a lot of the younguns is whinin again an we try an keep em still. Sal Capone come by with Persons from another hooch, luggin pots of water to drink. It isnt much, an he dont bring any thing to eat.

Lights when it gets real bad.

I never seen any thing like that. Its Dark one minute, then the sun come blazin up hot. The sky dont have any color, its awful searin white. When you down in the tangle, in the wet and the rot, you steamin an sweatin an the bugs is bitin an crawlin up your nose. A Person, he gettin used to that. Your head start bustin you can dunk it inna creek. You can eat a grub, an you can get a drink.

Out heres nothin, out here its bare an flat. Ever tree ever bush is brittle as a bone, the juice sucked out an all the green gone. Ever things dry an ever things dead.

Theres nowhere to go, isnt nowhere to hide. Drills, they got mats whats made outa straw. Mats on sticks thats keepin off the sun. Persons dont got any mats, we walkin in the heat. Who you think made them phuckin straw mats? Persons, thats who.

Not far off, the land drop a little, makin a gully to the right. We been stayin real close ever since we hit the flats. Cant see Rhidos, all you can see is the dust they kickin up, but thats where they at. Mockit says you walk over, you can see em clear. Dont, I tell him, an keep your mouth shut. We dont need folks thinkin bout that.

The suns straight high when they tell us all to sit. Why, Im thinkin, they want to stop here. Isnt nothing but dirt an a bunch of dead trees. Not enough shade for a vole or a snik. I dont know, an I not bout to ask.

We get a little water but we dont get enough. What we got we givin to the younguns, some of em lookin real bad.

Macky come over an say one of Pocks whos eight is maybe dead.

"Well he phuckin dead or not?" I ask him, "make up your mind, boy."

"I can go see," Macky says, an look at somethin else.

"Don't do nothin, just stay right here."

"Whatd I do, why you mad at me?"

"He isnt mad," Lily tells him, "go sit over there with Dit."

"Sorry," I tell her. "I cant help it, Im worried bout this."

"Macky know that."

"I dont know he does or not."

"Dits bad off. I thought he was better but he gettin awful hot."

"Ill try an get water. They got to give us water an somethin to eat, they goin to have to carry this shit by they selves."

"You goin to tell em that?"

"No, Im not goin to tell em that."

"What, then?"

"I dont know yet."

"You come up with somethin. I know you always do." *And what, I thinkin, you rekon thatll be?*

Sal Capone come round with Persons bringing water, an a pot of grub soup. Just like last time, isnt near enough. I tell ever one I can dont drink all you got, an save a little soup.

Course nobody doin that.



Wasnt long after we seen dust comin off the flats. When they gets closer we seen they more Drills. Only we never seen em before, this bunch is strangers, they come from far away. I seen traders, outsiders before, these Drills is nothin like that. These phuckers has clearly come to fight.

Soon as they comin in sight, a fearsome sound sweep through the Persons, ever Famly there. Ever body squeezin close, ever body moanin, shakin, holdin one another, coverin they faces, coverin they heads.

Dont blame em any one, its a dreadful thing to see. Even Sal Capone dont look too happy, an Sals not scared of any one.

A Drill, he walkin on his hands an he feet, dont hardly come up to your hip. Dont weigh much as a Person an a females smallern that. Weight an high, though, isnt what you want to think, you thinkin bout Drills. What you want to think bouts *mean*. What you want to think bouts strong, they strongern shit. What you want to think too, you want to think bout teeth.

Whatever you magine that phuckers thinkin, that likely isnt it. Isnt nothin inside that head cept hate an blood an killin boilin up, just waitin to bust on through. I tell a youngun that, sure as shit some Drill hops by an give him honey on a suck.

Teachin folks stuff, whats the use of that?

I listen real good, they think I doin somethin else. Pickin up stuff, puttin stuff down, listenin good. The big one with the little red eyes got teeth painted black. His armor isnt plain like Sals. Its real fine wood, got a lot of shiny stones, gotta lot of pretty shells. Got feathers offa birds, skins offa lizerts an sniks. An ever inch of that armor, on his arms on his shoulders, on his knees on his chest, ever phuckin inch is covered with spines, thorns, stickers of ever sort. You get even close to this Drill he gonna punch you fulla holes.

Sides all that, he got a turtul hat an he got a wood shiel, an the shiel an the hat they fulla thorns too. He got a big spear, which is longern Sals,

longern any I think I ever saw.

Theres two stays close to the big un with the thorns, an they got fine armor too. One of ems Mormon Nailer. The other ones Orangey Harding, and the main asshole, the one with the thorns, is Gandolph Scott. He tells ems all what to do, an they tell ever one else. Includin Sal Capone, who dont much care for doin that.

A couple Drills from their bunch an ours go down where the Rhidos are. They gone a long time. We listen, but we dont hear anything at all.

"What they doin, you think," Mockit wants to know, "I wouldnt get close to those things you give me all the wimins there is."

Pock an me we laughin bout that. Pocks hooch right next to Mockits, an he know what goin on there.

"You dont gotta worry," Pock says, "no one goin to do that, long as them wimins can run."

Mockit dont say nothin to Pock. Pocks bout as big as me.

"They not doin nothin," Pock says. "All they doin is they goin down an look."

"Why they do that?" Mockit want to know. "You seen a Rhido, why you want to see it again?"

"Just do is all."

"Why you just do? You just sayin, you not sayin what."

"A Drill do somethin cause he want to do it," Pock say, getting tired of this, "thats why. He dont have to ask you."

"What they doin they listenin. Thats what the Drills is doin down there..."

For a minute Im thinkin isnt anyone there, then Froom, he edgin by the fire. Isnt anyone expectin that, cause Froom dont like no one an nobody like him.

"What you talkin bout," Mockit says, "listenin to—*what?*"

"Rhidos," Froom says, "listenin to them."

Mockit laughs, but dont anyone else.

"Theres nothin to listen to," I tell him. "Nothin a Rhido goin to do but grunt."

"Grunt an fart some," Pock puts in. "I wouldnt listen to that."

"Its not that kinda listenin. Didnt say that."

"What kinda listenin there is?"

Froom look like he want outta there, like he wish he never come.

"I ast you somethin," says Pock.

Froom dont answer, an bout then the Drills come back. None of em talkin, just all walkin back. None of em lookin real happy at all.

"Thats *Orangey* Harding," Pock says, pointin to the shortest one of all. "Got a brother come to the fort one time. Got a knobber long as your arm."

"Who tol you that?"

"I seen him he was here. Brother looks just like him."

"I guess its so, Pock say it is," Mockit says.

Pock dont say nothin. In a minute Mockits gone.

The worst part is, we dont stay put till Dark. Ever one gotta get up, lift your shit an go. Darc Anthony an Sal, them an Doc Cabbage, they dont like it, but they wont cross the other Drills.

Theres five, maybe six hours Light, the longest Light I ever seen. The heat come down, then it rise up again, burnin your eyes and blisterin your feet. The grounds like walkin on fire. You look anywhere an ever things wavy, ever thing poundin in your head.

The younguns is already beat, an pretty soon they droppin on the trail. A Famly try to carry em on, some of em cant hardly carry theyselves. We bout lose Dit, but Im not leavin him behind. Lily cant help. She an Macky are keepin one another from fallin to the ground.

Isnt real long theres younguns by the way, covered up with dust, lookin like Persons made of clay. You walkin, you dont see bugs, dont see em anywhere. Soon as a youngun hits the ground, they swarmin ever where. Shiny black waddlers, clickin they pinchers, ants, nats an fat green flies. How they knowin, I wonder? What they eatin when we isnt there?

Florence of Arabia an fat Mamma Gass, them an little Silly Marlene, they got their hands full, lopin up an down, draggin folks off fore the bugs clean em out. Silly Marlene, she all swole up. I figure Darc, he the cause of that.

I said its the most awful Light I ever seen. You figure Dark would help, but Dark is worsen that...

Near as I can tell, theres leven, maybe ten went down, might be moren that. Most of em younguns, some of em not. Sackers one, an hes old as me, close on to sixteen. Strong as he could be. Whats his Famly goin to do now?

Drills gettin all worked up just fore the sun goes down. We hadnt seen nothin in the Light. Just a buncha zeebos that run fore we even got near.

What the Drills seein now is a Leon way off neath a sticker tree. Isnt nothin get a Drill goin like a Leon will. They lopin up an down, hoppin an screamin an beatin on they chests. Some of em throwin they sticks, make em feel like they doin somethin good. Females, they havent got sticks, so they throwing lotta shit.

Drills got reason for not likin Leons much. Ever now an then, a Leon trot down to the fort, waitin for a Drill to come by. Ever now an then, a Drill not comin home at Dark.

It start gettin cool an we huddle in a little stand of rock. Sal come round with water, moren we ever got before. We can smell cookfires burnin, but all we gets fruit that the Drills wont eat no more.

Theres Persons out there, come with the other Drills. We can hear em cryin close by. I dont think they got water. I dont think they got anything to eat.

Drills got a lotta mean in they heads. Drills dont see stuff the way a Person do. They did, theyd try an keep ever one alive to do shit they dont want to. A Drill, though, he dont think bout that.

Dit, he hot an he cold, he got the fever bad. Macky give him bout all of his water an I stop him doin that. I tell him its a fine thing to do, an how he gotta quit.

Lily hear me say it. She knows its what I gotta do. All the water in the world, Dit wont make it to the Light.

"I know what happenin, Ratch," Dit tells me, the words stickin scratchy in his craw. "You dont be worry bout me."

"I always worry bout you," I tell him. "You a lot of trouble, Dit. You fillin six baskets a grubs, you bringin home two. What you figure happen to them other four?"

Dit cant hardly make a grin, but he give it a try.

"Sometime I eat moren that. You just didnt ever see."

"You know what? I did the same thing, Dit. An nobody ever catch me cause Im as sly as you."

Dit too weak to answer that. I dont know if he hearin me at all.

Me an Pock talk some, an Brig is there too. Mockit, he not comin round since he aggravatom Pock. Booker an Tyro stoppin for a while.

Tyro lost two younguns on the march. Booker got a girl sick as Dit, an figure she likely goin too.

They all leavin, its only Pock an me. Macky sleepin, Lilys watchin Dit.

Pock says, "Ratch, its somethin bad, I got a feelin inside. Dont know what, but its bad, an likely worsen that."

"You tol me that bout a hunert times," I tell him. "Dont need to hear it again."

"Im just sayin."

"Thats it, you sayin. Dont be sayin anymore."

"Wont, then."

"Dont."

Pock, he squattin on his heels, got him a stick, makin circles on the ground.

"It shouldnt oughta be, you know it? Shouldnt be the way it is. You think bout it, same as I do, same as ever one, dont say you never doin that. I member stuff, Ratch. Just dont like to say I do."

"Good. Then dont."

"Whats the good of not talkin, you member too, you thinkin same as me.

"Maybe I thinkin some once. Im not thinkin now."

"Might say you don't. Doesnt mean you not..."

Thats when I push him down flat. Pock look surprised, me doin that.

"Im sayin this. Whatever in your head, keep it to yourself. Dont want to hear what you thinkin or anyone else. Go do somethin. Dont be sittin round here."

Pock, he dont say a thing. He put down his stick, he get up an go, I sittin by my self.

The fire bout gone. I stick a little dead grass on, it dont do any good.

I can hear whinin where the other Persons are, I can hear Rhidos shufflin in the Dark. Some of the Drills is movin about. A Drill dont ever keep still, you can count on that.

Lilys asleep, Im glad she doin that. Theres nothin she can do bout Dit. Dits goin, if he isnt gone now. Im lookin at the sky, lookin at the brights. Theres clouds goin by real fast. Im thinkin way Pock acting, I got to watch him now. He talkin to me like that, he talkin to somebody else. Some

people not thinkin, some people hasnt got a bit of sense—

I stand up quick cause I know hes right there. I see him, now, a shadow gainst the Dark. Then I see the other one, over by his self.

"I am ever having to admonish you, Ratch," Sal tells me. "There is no cause to having a fire. It is not be cooling, there is plenty of warming in the air."

*Isnt a fire no more, its phuckin gone out.*

"This time I am forgetting what I see. I am closing my eyes to your actions, I am seeing nothing of this. Ratch, you will have Lily rise from her sleeping. You will bring her here."

"What? What for?"

Sal dont like me sayin that. He lopes up closer an kicks my water pot. It breaks an clatters on the rocks. The ground sucks it up an thats all I got.

"Bring her, Ratch. Bring Lily here."

Somebody grunt an somebody shits, an now I can see whos up there with Sal. Somebody with a dead turtle hat, somebody with dirty little eyes. Somebody with a lotta thorns an stickers on pokin out...

Im not thinkin bout Lily at all. Lily pops in I get her out quick. The more I do that, the more she poppin in again. I oughta not get ina bother but I do. No ones taken Lily off before. What I thinkin, they wouldnt for nother year or so.

Only this isnt home no more. These Drills is not the same as Sal Capone or Darc, or Lon Peron.

"I think Dit maybe goin," Macky says. "He lyin awful still."

I go look an he cold as the ground, and I say, "Macky, Im afraid he is."

Florence an the others wont be checking till Light. Dont want Dit where the bugsll get him, so I cover him with dust an leave him where he is.

"You done a good job watchin," I tell Macky. "Good as anyone could."

"Not as good as Lily."

"Just bout as good. I bet she tell you herself when she gettin back here."

Macky wants to ask, wants me to tell him, but he keep it all in. He growin up good, but I wouldnt tell him that.

Long before Light sets in, Drills is up gruntin an lopin about, yellin an barkin, do this an do that. Mockits Persons an Pocks is gettin up slow. All of ems hungry, thirsty an sick.

Sal come over an tell Macky come along with him. Sal don't even look at me. Macky comes back, bringin water an grubs. Macky looks scared, an he goes off again. This time he got Lily too.

I dont hardly know its her. I look at her I wanta be sick. Her skins all dirty, caked in dust, flakin like the ground when the sun dry ever thing up. She shakin awful bad. Her eyes is open an I have to shade her cause she starin at the sun.

I can see her fuzz I can kinda see her cut, but she all scratched up on her belly down there. Theres blood an dust an I cant clean her up, theres not enough water to spare.

"Here," I tell her, "you drink some of this. You feel real better soon." I take some water in my mouth an open her lips an let the water seep in. She chokin some, then she swallow an I know its goin in. I give her another an she try an say somethin but nothin comin out.

"She be all right, Ratch? She dont look too good." I turn up an theres Mockit an he starin at Lily, his eyes getting bigger all the time.

"You seen enough," I tell him, "now be outa here fore I standin up." I know what he doin an he know it too. He look off quick an go back where he come.



Im thinkin, they coulda give her a clothes, they coulda give em back. A Drill, though, they dont think bout that. Dont matter to them they got a knobber or a cut they got buds hangin out. Clothes is somethin Persons do.

I lay a little stitch I took off Dit an put it cross her parts. Wasnt anything to hide her buds, they just be pokin out. An Mockit, he can find somewhere else to look.

Me seein her now isnt like I seen her at the creek. Dont have the feelin I had bout her then. She back bein a sister an I feel good bout that.

If the heat was bad before, its worsen that now. Worsen I ever magined it could be. Ever one startin off sick, ever one hungry, beat an dried up from the awful Light before.

The shit we sposed to be haulin, me an Lily, Macky an Dit, is bundles of sticks so the Drills can have a fire. Where wes at, there isnt any sticks, isnt anything at all. Only now Dits gone, an Lily she barely on her feet. Im haulin three loads an Macky haulin one.

Same things happenin with all the others too. The younguns cryin an rollin all aroun. Ever Person can is haulin they load, but the heat is meltin us down. Isnt half a mile fore folks start droppin what they got, and fallin to the ground.

The Drills, they real upset bout that. Sal Capone an Sherbert Hoover come lopin down the line, growlin an snappin they teeth at ever one in sight. Sherb Hoover got a stick an starts hittin Persons on the back. Ever ones squealin, ever ones scared. You cant ever tell what Sherbs bout to do.

Sal tells him stop, he done enough of that. Sal gets me an Mockit and Pock an the rest of the olders an make us pick everbody up.

"It is shameful to me you are not being proper in your work," Sal says. "We have many fars to go. You must not be falling down. You must not be dropping your burdens to the ground. I am greatly disappointed. You will not be doing this again."

Sal scratches on his knobber, and turns and lopes away. Sherbert

Hoover shakes his stick at me, an follows Sal down the trail. Two of the new Drills is watchin all this. Both of ems got hats. Both of ems got mats on a pole to keep the sun out. One of em is Orangey Harding. The other ones Gandolph Scott, who taken Lily off. He dont even look at us, an Im glad when they both gone away.

Isnt even high noon, an Macky says bout six has dropped away, but I countin moren that. I know for certain Lily cant last. She hasnt hardly spoke since Macky brung her back.

"I can pick you up," I tell her, "you dont have to walk. I know you feelin bad."

"You got plenty to carry, Ratch. You dont need to be haulin me too."

"This stuff isnt heavy. I could do it all day. Bet I could do it longern that."

"I can take some," Macky says, "I'm big enough to."

"You bout as big as a vole," I tell him. "Shit, you no biggern a ant, thats you."

"I can do it. I can do it same as you."

"You cant neither. Dont be askin me again."

I see right off the hurt in Mackys eyes. Lily lookin off, but I catch her sad too.

I wish I hadnt yell at Macky but I did. It isnt him, its ever thing else. Ever thing wrong, ever thing bad bout what we doin out here. Walkin in the sun, hungry an nothin to drink. Whats the good of that?

Somethin is happenin up front. Somethin goin on, somethin givin Drills a fit. We all lookin at ever one else, wonderin what it all about. Then Darc Anthony trottin on back, barkin up a storm. Ever body gotta stop, he tell us, ever body put his stuff down, we better be still, better not make a fuss.

I look at Mockit, he lookin back. He can smell em same as me fore they even in sight. They stink blowin straight up the draw, a dry an chokin smell strong enough to gag a stone.

Its shit an dust an the smell of they parts hangin down tween they legs. Isnt nothing bad as that, isnt nothin foul an nasty as a Rhido is. You maybe not member you Mama, you may not member nothin else, you goin to member how a Rhido smell. You five maybe ten, you wakin an smell em you hear em out there, you edgin in close to you kin.

"Im scared, Ratch," Macky says, huggin the dirt next to me. "Im scared real bad. I dont wanta see em, dont want em seein me."

"They not after you, boy. They dont care bout you."

"I think I gotta pee."

"You do, better not be on me."

"You be smellin em before," Lily says, talkin best she can. "You member I tell you, that song we used to sing? You member that, Im certain that you do."

Macky too scared, dont even know his name. Theres other younguns close by hasnt ever smelled Rhido fearsome an awful as this. They howlin an whinin, the olders tryin to still em fore the Drills comin back.

"Stay down," Mockit says, an Pock tells his Persons too. "Stay down low, dont even try an look."

Im holdin Macky, he rollin his eyes, he shakin like a vole hear a snik close by. Lily too sick to hardly try.

I seein em now, keepin down an eatin dirt just raisin up my eyes. They heavin, rumblin, snortin and fartin, gruntin and poundin the ground. Isnt nothing bigger, isnt nothin ugly as a Rhido swingin his big head about, thrashin his terrible horns, thisaway and that. Phuckin horns is pointy, phuckin horns sharp, longern a chile, near longern a man.

I want to shut my eyes tight, want to be cryin like a chile. They comin so close I can see they little mouth, I can see they tiny eyes.

Theys worse, too, worsen even that. The Drills has painted white circles round the Rhidos eyes. Painted jaggy lightnin on they great saggin hides, painted moons, painted suns, all kinds a scary sights. Some got yellor on

they horns, some got stripes goin all down they sides, blackern blood, near blackern Dark...

Then ever Person there they screamin and moanin, ever one tryin to dig they selves a hole. Some of em lets they bowels go, which dont help at all.

Someone cryin, someone tearin at the ground. I look round, isnt anyone but me. I shakin real bad, I tryin to breathe. What I seeins not real cause now I seein Drills too, screechin an barkin, snappin they muzzles, barin they teeth...

*Gotta not be, gotta be somethin in my head. They ridin, what they doin, perched right up on the Rhidos theyselves, right on the Rhidos phuckin backs!*

I think my heart goin to stop right there. Mockits eyes is rollin, Macky is throwin up spit. I never even thought about, never even magined nothing awful as this...

When its over you can hear the awful quiet, so heavy it pressin on the ground. The Rhidos is gone, leavin dust an a fearful smell behind.

You listen real close, you can hear em still, hear em like far off thunder, rollin off the edge of the world.

Im standin real slow. Some of the others is gettin up too. Nobody talkin, no one makin a sound. Nobody cept Mockit, Mockit cant keep from talkin too long.

"What you think they doin, Ratch? Where they goin to go?"

"Why you askin me, what the phuck I know?"

Mockits face covered up with dust. Cant see nothin but his eyes. Looks like somethin hangin from a tree, somethin livin in the Dark.

"They doin that dream," he sayin. "Whatever they done before. They doin it again."

"Wasnt any dream, Mockit. That look like a dream to you?"

Mockit dont answer. He scared an I scared too, but I wont let it show. I

look out over the far. I mightve seen Rhidos, I mightve seen hot stuff risin off the flats.

One of the wimins starts wailin somewhere, then another after that. I waitin, watchin the path goes up the little draw. Waitin for a Drill maybe tell us what to do. Nobody there, nobody comin down.

What I better do, I thinkin, I better squat an wait. Squat down boilin in the sun like ever body else. Squat down waitin, ever body sick, ever body dyin, waitin for a drink.

That's what I oughta do. I oughta but I dont. Somethin happen inside me, somethin in my head. Im not squattin no more, I standin up walkin, walkin up the draw. Mockit say somethin behind me, Pock, he sayin somethin too. I keep goin, I not lookin no where.

At the top of the draw, I stop an look down. I lookin where the Drills is campin. They stuff is scattered all bout, they cookfires burnin behind a stand of rock.

Shit, I sayin to myself, isnt nobody there. Nothin but females under a little straw tent. Mama Gass an Silly Marlene, Florence of Arabia too. Dim Bassinger and little Semi More. Pain Fonda got a youngun suckin on her buds.

I turn round an start back the other way. Florence start screechin, showin her gums, gnashin her teeth. She get the others goin too.

Mockit and Pock is waitin, Pock lookin at me like I crawl out of a hole.

"What they doin," Pock say, "what they up to down there? What we spose to do now?"

"Not doin nothin, isnt nobody there."

"How we goin to get water, then, how we goin to do that?"

Him an Mockit is yappin, I walkin away. Persons is moanin, Persons is rollin on the ground.

Macky, he sittin over Lily, shakin this way an that.

"Lily she gone, Ratch. Not even breathin no more."

I gettin down to look, put a hand on her face. Her skin is burnin, her

lips is swole dry.

"She sleepin, Macky. She isnt gone yet."

"She goin to be, though?"

"Try an shade her. Be doin what you can."

"We goin to get some water, Ratch? They havent brought us water in a real long time."

"Boy, you got any sense? Got any sense at all?" I standin, lookin at Macky, lookin at Lily, thinkin bout her in the mossy place, in the pretty goldy light.

"Isnt no water. Isnt goin to *be* none, either. Lily goin to die like Dit an Little Nik. I spect you an me, we goin to die too."

I turnin an I gone, Macky cryin an theres nothin I can do. Cant do nothin for Lily, cant do nothin for me. Pock say somethin I dont hardly hear. Whatever that somethin doin in my head, it doin it again...

The sun, he boilin in a white an empty sky. My skin be fryin, sweat burnin in my eyes. Dont figure goin far, just far nough to see. Dont know why, just know it gotta be.

Theres a little place I can hunker down some, look past the draw an down on the flats, stretchin out below. I inchin up an look, inchin up slow. My heart near stoppin, they right there close. I could throw a rock an hit Sal an phuckin Knob Dole. I could hit Gandolph Scott, sittin on a stripy Rhido.

Isnt no use tryin to count. Theres Rhidos far as I can see, black old hides covered in the dust they feet stirrin up. Dust an shit an bout a zillion flies. Switchin they tails, shakin they pointy horns bout. Snortin, snuffin, pawin at the ground, Drills perchin on they backs.

Ratch, Im thinkin, what the phuck you doin here, get up get outta here fast. This is what part of me thinkin. Other parts thinkin what Froom is sayin, how Drills they *hearin* Rhidos, only that kinda hearins not the same...

"Ratch, you outta you head? What you doin up here?"

"Shit, Mockit, don't be doin that!"

Mockit, he come up behind me, I bout jump outta my skin.

"Get on back," I tell him, "you dont belong up here."

"Whats the matter with you? Dont no one belong up here."

"Maybe I do."

"Do what?"

"I here, you seein that plain. Maybe thats where I spose to be."

"You talkin funny now. Dont be doin that, Ratch. You kinda scarin me."

I lookin up, lookin Mockit in the eye. "You the one said it. They doin that dream out there. They done it before, they doin it again."

"Huh-uh," Mockit shakin his head. "I never said a thing like that. Even if I did, I dont know what I talkin bout, you know that."

"Mockit..."

Mockit, he stop. He hearin it too. So do the Rhidos, so do the Drills. Theres thunder way off, thunder an a awful cloud of dust. Whatever it is, its just cross the flats, comin up behind a little rise. The ground begin to tremble, like the world be comin apart. I can feel it in my belly, I can feel it in my parts. Lookin down theres little grains of sand, dancing on the dirt.

Thunder dyin, the ground not shakin, ground keepin still. Hot wind blowin cross the flats, hot wind burnin, chokin ever breath. Hot wind scorchin, scarin off the dust, showin whats hidin up there...

Mockit, he seein it first, eyes comin outta his head. Then I seein it too, seein what he see, seein what a chile be seein, wakin up cryin, wakin from a dream.

My gut wanta be throwin up, but they nothin in there, nothin it can do.

*What waitin, what sittin up there is Rhidos, Rhidos standin with they heads down low, Rhidos still as they can be. Rhidos that got no color at all, Rhidos white as the moon, Rhidos pale as dead bone!...*

"Phuck phuck phuck," Mockits moanin, shakin his head, sweat drippin off his nose. Somethin wet, somethin runnin down his leg.

"Stop doin that," I tell him, "ever thing stinkin enough round here."

"Cant help it, Ratch. I likely doin somethin else too."

"Mockit, that be the last thing you do, I tellin you that."

If me an Mockit havin a dream, it getting more scary all the time. Hunkered on them Rhidos is Drills, an they isnt like Drills I ever seen. They fur is dull as dirt, they baby shit brown. They whiskers an they ruff is kinda white. They all got long pointy sticks, an the sticks got raggedy skins hangin off the end. Some got skins, an some got strings of yeller bones. Even far off, you can hear bones rattlin in the wind.

Our Drills wearin armor made of wood, stickers an dead turtul hats. These Drills isnt wearin anything at all. Nothin but snik an lizert skins wrapped about they heads.

"Isnt many of em," Mockit sayin real low, "we got moren that."

"I can see, you dont have to tell me that."

"What you gettin on me bout, Ratch? Havent done nothin to you—"

Mockit, he stop, cause somethin happenin cross the flats. One of the Rhidos movin outta line, clompin up ahead of the rest. The Drill on his back, he got his head covered with a scary lookin mask. Mask got big white teeth, got shiny red eyes, got a muzzle painted black.

The Drill standin up, start hoppin, screechin an shakin his pole at the Drills over here. The rest of his bunch, they start jumpin round too.

I leanin up an lookin down. Gandolph Scott, he be bout to have a fit. He howlin, barin his teeth. Wavin *his* pole, screamin at the Drill across the flats. He turn round, an bark at Sal Capone. Whatever he sayin, Sal sayin no. He yellin at Gandolph, Gandolph yellin back.

Then, fore you can blink, Gandolph swingin his pole, slammin Sal hard across the head. The blow lift Sal off his Rhido an knock him to the ground.

Doc Cabbage and Darc and Lon Peron is comin at Gandolph, they eyes blazin red. Gandolphs Drills is ready for that. They pokin they spears,



drivin the other Drills back. Darc keeps comin, hoppin over one Rhido an then the next. Orangey Harding just waitin, then he run Darc right through, his spear comin out the other side.

Sals Drills is howlin, snappin they muzzles, but theres nothin they can do. Gandolph Scott dont bother to look. He give a loud yell, raise his pole, pointin at the sky. The Rhido he ridin shake his big head, give a rumble an a snort, give a tremble an a fart. Then he start walkin, then he start to *move...*

Rhido startin real slow, trottin, clompin on his big stubby feet. Gandolph clutchin the Rhido, holdin on tight, purple ass slappin up an down.

"Phuck," Mockit sayin, diggin a hand in my back, "oh phuck, Ratch," same thing he sayin before.

Ever Rhido in the bunch, they headin after Gandolph Scott. All of em racin toward a thicket of spears, waitin just across the flat.

"Gotta get outta here, Ratch. Gotta get outta here *now.*"

"You wanta go, get."

"What? You outta you head? It happenin. The dream be happenin now. Doin it, right out there!"

"I know what they doin."

"We not spose to be here. Shouldnt be seein all this."

*Ratch, things you dont member good, thats what a dreams all about...*

Where that come from, what it doin in my head?

"Get back an see what you can do, Mockit. See bout your folks, an see bout Macky too. See if Lily dead. See you can get any body walkin, gettin outta here. Dont know if it do any good, but wont hurt nothin to try..."

Mockit dont answer. I turn round an Mockit isnt there.

Sun fryin my back, bugs itchin ever where. Throat closin up I cant even

spit.

Ever thing fast out there, ever thing blurrin, ever thing makin me dizzy in the head.

Rhidos from here is poundin cross the plain, raisin clouds of dust, getting closer all the time. Somethin on the other side, somethin not right. White Rhidos not movin, just standin there, silent an still. Like nothin wrong, nothin be goin on at all.

Gandolph seein this too, an he shakin his stick, movin his Rhidos faster still...

I wipin off sweat, slappin at a bug. When I lookin up, seein again, somethin cold, somethin scary, climbin up my neck. Wasnt but a blink be passin but ever thing different, nothin look the same. The whites, they shiftin, movin, tornin round fast, some of em left an some of em right. Baby shit Drills they hangin on tight.

Gandolph, he keep comin, eatin up dust, ridin straight in where the other Rhidos been. Gandolph see it, smell it in the air. Know somethin comin, know somethin bad, cant figure what it is. Know, in a blink, they nothing he can do. Rhidos snortin, diggin up ground, goin so fast cant nothin stop em now...

*First ones to know is Rhidos headin the pack, Rhidos bigger, faster than the rest. Rhidos heavy with muscle an bone, Rhidos with awful killin horns. Best Rhidos got the meanest, ugliest phuckers on they backs, Drills with armor, stickers an barbs. Drills with big turtul hats: Gandolph Scott and Orangey Harding. Spank Sinatra, Hairyyass Truman. Mormon Nailer an Phony Curtis too.*

They all famous bout a second, second an a half. It happen that quick, happen in a blink. One blink they somethin, next they phuckin meat. Yellin, screechin, twitchin on the ground, bones be snappin, guts squishin out.

Hardly a one of em see what get em, most of em dead fore that. I see em though, seen they awful heads when they comin up the rise, seen they big tuskers, they little black eyes, seen they awful noses, hangin like snakes, sweepin on the ground.

Cant believe the awful things I seein, not anybody could. They biggern anything, anything they is. Coming right at you, not ever slowin down.

Seen one steppin on Mormon Nailers head, smushin it flat, all the juices spurtin out. Seen one pick up Orangey Harding with his nose, lift him up an toss him flat. Orangey screamin an thrashin about.

Rhidos nghtin, doin what they could. Slammin they horns at a mountain of hide. Mountain, he screechin, givin a terrible cry. Shakin, swayin, slashin his tuskers, sendin that Rhido screamin to the ground.

Rhidos turnin now, shovin one another, crazy in they heads. Ever one wantin outta there.

Drills runnin too, but there nowhere to go. Rhidos, they don't stomp em, somethin else will. Ever one of them phuckers got a bunch of baby shit Drills, hoppin on they backs, barkin, howlin, tossin them bony rattle spears.

No one, nothin, got a chance of getting outta that. Isnt nothing to do out there, nothing to do but die...

Im not dead, I stayin alive. Maybe I figure what for. Got down diggin like a vole, got a half ass hole, curlin up cryin while the monsters stompin by.

Not comin out till the sun bout down. Ever thing dead now, ever thing gone. Out on the flats theres Rhidos an Drills, bodies ever where. Ever thing flat, ever thing stinkin out there. Even one of them nightmars, lyin on its back, big ol legs stickin up in the air.

Birds an jakuls they havin a feast. Some of ems eatin out the belly, some of em chewin on the nose.

First thing I dos get me a couple pointy sticks. Next thing I find me some full water pots. Lots of em broke but plenty of ems not. Ever body gone, we got lots of water now. Even got some fruits thats nearly fit to eat.

Awful thing is, you cant even tell who anybody is. Persons an Drills they all cut up, an them thats not is flat. Cant find Macky or Lily. I hope Lily dead fore any thing got back here.

I found Sal Capone. Wasnt much left but a head an a buncha broken bones.

"I require help," Sal says. "You are bringing water, Ratch, and I am needing shade."

"You be fine," I tell him, "bout a blink an a half."

How they do it, Im thinkin, them Rhidos the color of bone, them baby shit Drills? What kinda creatures was that, where they comin from? I know the dream, an it never had that. Any of the younguns they gettin outta this, some of ems Mamas some day an they gotta have a new dream, they gotta member this...

I walkin past the camp where the females been, Florence an Silly an the rest. Isnt nothin there to see. Ever thing flat cept off behind the rocks, where they got the cookfires. Big phuckers didnt get that. Some of the spits still standin from supper the night before.

Im walkin on, down to the draw. Isnt somethin you want to bother bout. Mightve been kin, or someone you know, an no sense thinkin on that.

What I be thinkin is what Pock said. Somethin most ever body thinkin now an then. How its not right. What we gotta do, way we gotta be. ltd be differa there wasn't so many. If we was moren them. Seems to me thats the cause right there. Seems like thats how it is...