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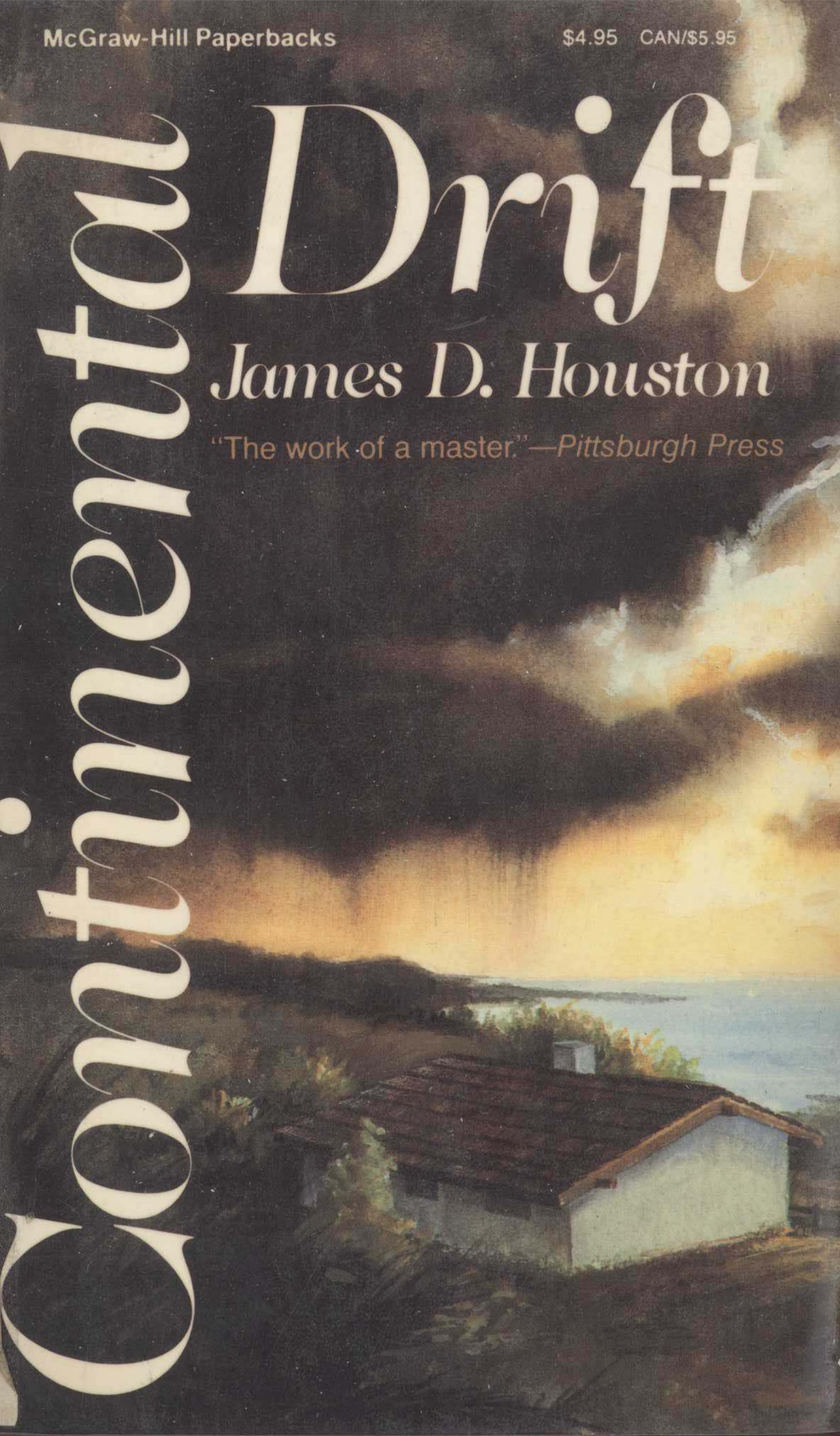
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# Continental Drift

James D. Houston

*"The work of a master." —Pittsburgh Press*

Continental



# *Continental Drift*

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by James D. Houston

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**ALSO BY JAMES D. HOUSTON**

**FICTION**

*Between Battles* (1968)

*Gig* (1969)

*A Native Son of the Golden West* (1971)

*The Adventures of Charlie Bates* (1973)

**NONFICTION**

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*Open Field*, with John Brodie (1974)

*Three Songs for My Father* (1974)

*California Heartland*, co-editor with Gerald Haslam (1978)

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# Part One

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*Farther along we'll know all about it.  
Farther along we'll understand why.  
Cheer up, my brother, live in the sunshine.  
We'll understand it all, by and by.*

—TRADITIONAL HYMN





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## THE PROLOGUE

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From high above, say gazing down from one of our tracking satellites, he can see it plain as an incision, a six-hundred-mile incision some careless surgeon stitched up across the surface of the earth. It marks the line where two great slabs of the earth's crust meet and grind together. Most of North America occupies one of these slabs. Most of the Pacific Ocean floats on the other. A small lip of the Pacific slab extends above the surface, along America's western coastline, a lush and mountainous belt of land not as much a part of the rest of the continent as it is the most visible piece of that slab of crust which lies submerged. The line where these two slabs, or plates, meet is called the San Andreas Fault. It cuts south from San Francisco, past San Jose, underneath the old San Juan Bautista Mission, on down behind Los Angeles, and back under water again at the Gulf of California.

The Pacific plate, he will tell you, is creeping north and west at about two inches per year, an example of the movement geologists call continental drift. Our globe, which appears to be divided into continents and bodies of water, is actually a patchwork of these vast plates, all floating around on a kind of subterranean pudding. What it resembles most is a badly fractured skull. From time to time the towns and cities along the fault line have been jiggled or jolted by temblors large and small, when sections of it buckle or lock,

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and then unbend, release, or settle. There are people who predict that one day the ultimate quake is going to send a huge chunk of California sliding into the ocean like Atlantis. They foresee this as one of the worst disasters in the history of the civilized world. They sometimes add that in a land as bizarre and corrupt as California is reputed to be, such a fate has been well earned.

Montrose Doyle will tell you all that is poppycock, both the physics and the prophecy. He will tell you that the earth's crust is three hundred miles thick, whereas the fault line only cuts down for thirty of those miles. He will tell you that if anything is going to undo this piece of coast it will be the accumulated body weight of all the people who have been moving into his part of the world at a steady rate since 1849. But it won't be the San Andreas. He has made it his business to find out what he can about this creature, because he owns fifty-five acres of orchard and grazing land that border it. He grew up on this ranch, will probably die here, and during his forty-six years he has seldom felt more than a tic across the earth's skin, an infrequent shiver in the high cupola which serves as his personal antenna and seismograph.

Montrose has studied with fascination the photographs of rotundas upended in the streets of San Francisco during the famous quake of 1906. He has corresponded with experts. And he has escorted visitors over to Hollister, twenty-five miles east of where his own house stands. An otherwise neat and orderly farm town, Hollister happens to be gradually splitting in two, because it sits in the fracture zone, like an Eskimo village caught on a cracking ice floe. By following cracks you can trace the subtle power of the fault as it angles under the town, offsetting sidewalks and curbstones and gutters, an effect most alarming in the house of a chiropractor which you pass soon after entering Hollister from the west. One half of a low concrete retaining wall holding back the chiropractor's lawn has been carried north and west about

eight inches. The concrete walkway is buckling. Both porch pillars lean precariously toward the coast. In back, the wall of his garage is bent into a curve like a stack of whale's ribs. The fact that half his doomed house rides on the American plate and the other half rides the Pacific has not discouraged this chiropractor from maintaining a little order in his life. He hangs his sign out front, he keeps his lawn well mowed and the old house brightly, spotlessly painted.

One afternoon Montrose leaned down to talk with a fellow in Hollister who was working on the transmission of a Chevy pickup. The curb his truck stood next to had been shattered by the ageless tension of those two slabs of earth crust pulling at each other. Five inches had opened in the curb, like a little wound, and someone had tried to fill it with homemade concrete, and that had started to split.

Monty said, "Hey!"

The grease-smearred face emerged, irritably. It was hot. The man said, "Yeah?"

"Hey, doesn't the fault line run through this part of town?"

"The what?"

"The San Andreas . . ."

"Oh, that damn thing." The man waved his wrench aimlessly. "Yeah, she's around somewhere," and he slid back out of sight underneath his pickup.

Montrose regards that man with fondness now. He voiced Monty's own attitude pretty well, which is to say, none of this really troubles him much. Is he a fatalist? Yes. And no. He anticipates. Yet he does not anticipate. What he loves to dwell on—what he savors so much during those trips to Hollister—is that steady creep which, a few million years hence, will put his ranch on a latitude with Juneau, Alaska. He admires the foresight of the Spanish cartographers who, in their earliest maps, pictured California as an island. Sometimes late at night, after he has been drinking heavily, he will hike out to his fence line and imagine that he can feel beneath

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his feet the dragging of the continental plates, and imagine that he is standing on his own private raft, a New World Noah, heading north, at two inches per year.

Most of the time he doesn't think about it at all. It is simply there, a presence beneath his land. If it ever comes to mind during his waking hours, he thinks of it as just that, a presence, a force, you might even say a certainty, the one thing he knows he can count on—this relentless grinding of two great slabs which have been butting head-on now for millennia and are not about to relax.

# 1

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Montrose was born in California, which still puts him in a minority out west. But he has at least one thing in common with almost all his friends and enemies. His folks came from somewhere else, caught up in one of those large movements that give this region its character, or as some say, lack of character—that subterranean drifting of the plates, and the ongoing drift of multitudes from their various origins toward all the murky promises of the western shore. They drift and they drive and they dribble in from every part of the globe, but mostly up from Spanish America and out from the south or southwest, and we find both these strains mixing in the Doyle ancestry. The southern by blood, the Spanish by osmosis.

Monty's granddad first, the one who tumbled, the one who had to haul his ragtaggle family down out of the high hard mountain country mainly because he just plain got tired of working. This happened in the fall of 1899, which was about the time that year's depression crept up the side of Cumberland Mountain, Tennessee, and into the cabins and the cupboards and finally right out onto the hand-hewn tables of the back-country farmers and skunk hunters there. He had heard of an orchard he could pick for the picking, and his plan was to put all his kids to work gathering and drying apples to earn enough cash before winter, to get them down to Nashville, where he could put them to work again.

We see him hunched to gather golden apples in the late sun, yellow light rising from the apples themselves, while his



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wife and seven kids spread down the slope of the untended orchard, up into the trees, scrabbling through leaves to fill their gunnysacks. We see him rise and lean against a tree, as if for support, as if his back ails him. He is thirty-one years old. He lets one hand slide up the trunk, over the lip of a dead gash in the tree, and what does he find there, praise the Lord? A small flat brown flask of that hard cider he bottled two months back.

Falling out of sight behind the trunk, he leans into a long, world-centering pull, then sits a moment gazing up through rusty autumn leaves at the gorgeous sunlight scattered across the top of this tree. He corks the bottle, slips it back into its dark notch, and springs up, yelling, "Hey, you younguns, how you spect to fill that wagon up with apples, gittin near on five o'clock and you actin like this is Christmas and nothing to do but lay around starin out the winda. C'mown now, git to gittin," turning then to see his wife, Monty's grandma, thirty yards away beneath another tree, looking with the one look she has for him now and for the rest of their days together. It is not hatred, not disgust, not malice, not long suffering or self-pity. It is the steeled, unwavering look of a gospel minister saying to his flock with his face only, "I know your sins, and I know God's path, and you and I are going to walk that path together if I have to drag you by the throat every inch of the way."

That look is just a flicker in the gold-spattered orchard in high-country Tennessee. She drops to her knees and begins to shovel windfall fruit into an enormous basket. Doyle does the same, relieved that she didn't open her mouth, that all he has to carry is the knowledge of what she has to carry, and he long ago found this burden to be light enough. He is now floating slightly, across a bed of mulched leaves, and drinking in the apple smell, the brown rot from tiny spreading bruises, the open spots where birds have drunk. His nose squeezes all these smells to fresh, new cider before it hits the bloodstream,



and three or four breathings leave him high as the orchard's highest trees, up there with the bright golden apples no one will ever reach.

Grover Doyle, Monty's dad, was four years old that day. Those apples stayed with him for the rest of his life, along with his mother's eye and his father's thirst. If you had asked him, twenty years later, why he was setting out long rows of Delicious saplings here on the coast of California, he would never have mentioned it, but those trees still glimmered way in the back of his memory, and the whole family scrabbling up and down the side of Cumberland Mountain. In fact, if you had asked him where he came from, he would confess to Tennessee with reluctance. He liked to call himself a full-blooded Texan. He bragged on Texas, sang loud songs like "The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You," and mournful tear-jerkers like "The Streets of Laredo." And like many a boastful Texan, Grover had left that land behind at the first opportunity, the way his dad had soon left Nashville behind. "Born in Texas," old Grover used to say. "Born again in Jesus. Born the third time in Californ-ay-yea!"

Acreage was cheap in those days. Land that sells now for five or eight thousand dollars an acre, back then sold for two thousand dollars a hundred. Grover bought a lot more than he needed or could use, figuring that if the price of land had been going up since 1849, the trend was likely to continue. His main interests were animals, apples, and the arable portions of his terrain, which later on became his annuity, the chunks he sliced from the perimeter and sold off. Montrose, when his time came, inherited what remained of the orchards. He inherited the house, the barns, his mother's love, his father's voice, his grandma's eye, and his granddad's thirst.

By spending most of his life around here, he also inherited

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something his blood kin did not bequeath him. Perhaps inheritance isn't the word. This could be something absorbed, or ingested, or inhaled with the lifelong blending of apple scent and crumbling adobe and exhaust fumes and molecules of rubber dust that hang forever in the air above the freeways. He inherited a state of mind that goes right back to the Spaniards, where everything out west begins.

His land, this land, actually began in the minds of men like Hernando Cortez. In the time before Cortez named California, the land was inhabited by cougar, deer, grizzlies, eagles, eventually by the Indians. The land had not changed much, because those inhabitants had nothing to compare it to, no sense of other lands, small sense for other times. It is said that the tribe who once lived in the region where Monty's house stands now deliberately erased the past. When a man died, all his belongings were buried with him and his name was never mentioned again. Imagine what that must have been like. The only generation our generation. The only villages those we can walk to. The only time our time. If anything preceded us, it was water, until the animals came.

The Spaniards brought their pasts and their futures, like all the rest who came along after the Indians, like Monty's father, who came west dreaming, sixty years ago, a sharecropper's son dreaming of conquest, dreaming of ranches. In such a land Montrose has learned to take for granted unending waves of explorers, wizards, gypsies, visionaries, conquistadors, people who want to take what is here and turn it into something else. He has found life in his region like trying to grow a garden in the middle of a three-ring circus, with a family of trapeze artists swinging wildly above and prepared at any moment to commit suicide by plunging headfirst into his tomato vines. The odd thing is, Montrose still believes it is possible to do this and not go insane. It is a matter of conditioning. And it is a matter of continual vigilance.

Not long ago he was standing in his front yard when a

truck came rumbling up the driveway. It is fifty yards down to the county road. From the road you can barely see the cupola atop his two-story house. Whoever turns into his driveway knows who lives here or has a good reason for turning. Montrose had been listening to this truck pull the grade, waiting. When it finally lurched into view he had to grin. He had recently seen a television rerun of *The Grapes of Wrath*. He recognized the truck immediately and the style of travel first made popular by the Joad family on their laden journey west from Oklahoma during the thirties after their soil failed and the tractors drove them out. This truck was a rusty GMC flatbed, the blunt-nosed, indestructible kind of GMC, a rhinoceros of a truck, with a healthy, relentless grunting from underneath its scarred and venerable hood.

A small house had been erected on the flatbed, in the manner of a log cabin. Through a tiny window Montrose saw a kerosene lamp and, as the truck pulled to a stop, the snout of a large dog, perhaps an Afghan. One of Monty's retrievers came bounding off the porch with a short, territorial bark. Monty held him, and studied the pots and pans hanging from hooks outside the window, framing the Afghan's snout. Faded, recently washed clothes were drying over the tailgate. The couple sitting up front wore old coveralls and mail-order plaid shirts. The man wore a dark beard. His hair, like the woman's, was disheveled, and he stared out at Montrose with dark, gloomy eyes. The only difference between this man and Tom Joad of *The Grapes of Wrath* was that Joad was financially destitute. This man had left a small fortune behind. His father once held the controlling interest in a root beer chain that encircles Trenton, New Jersey. Everything else was the same. He had come west hoping for some dramatic change in his life.

He smiled cautiously before he spoke. "Anybody living in that house?"

At moments like this Montrose adopts a country manner; he assumes his granddad's Tennessee voice. He was glad to be wearing the old straw cowboy hat, the faded jeans. He pulled