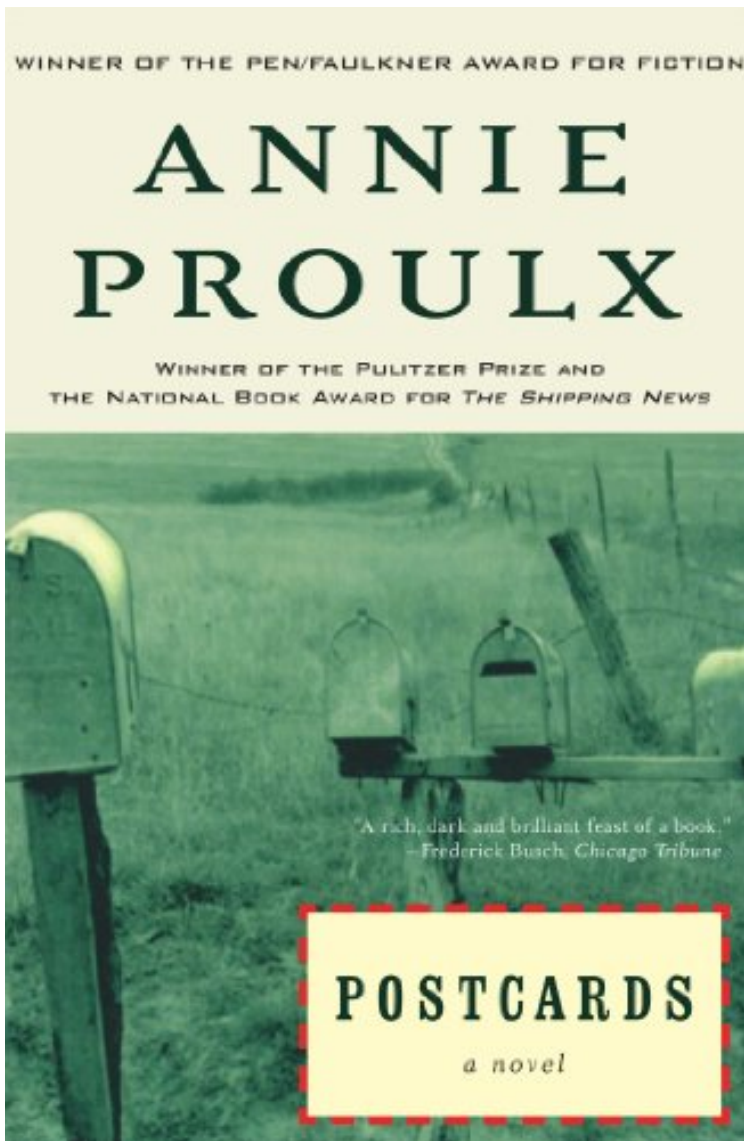


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Postcards (English Edition)



Par Annie Proulx
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurE. Annie Proulx's first novel, Postcards, winner of the 1993 Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction, tells the mesmerizing tale of Loyal Blood, who misspends a lifetime running from a crime so terrible that it renders him forever incapable of touching a woman. Blood's odyssey begins in 1944 and takes him across the country from his hardscrabble Vermont hill farm to New York, across Ohio, Minnesota, and Montana to British Columbia, on to North Dakota, Wyoming, and New Mexico and ends, today, in California, with Blood homeless and near mad. Along the way, he must live a hundred lives to survive, mining gold, growing beans, hunting fossils and trapping, prospecting for uranium, and ranching. In his absence, disaster befalls his family; greatest among their terrible losses are the hard-won values of endurance and pride that were the legacy of farm people rooted in generations of intimacy with soil, weather, plants,

and seasons. Postcards chronicles the lives of the rural and the dispossessed and charts their territory with the historical verisimilitude and writerly prowess of Cather, Dreiser, and Faulkner. It is a new American classic..comReproduced as graphics that preface narrative sections, the postcards in this novel -- communications between the Blood family and their son Loyal, as well as other personal mail and advertising material -- progressively reveal the insecurity of the rural Bloods in the changing post-war world.

Loyal has fled into exile after an accidental killing, but cannot find a haven of rest. The family patriarch, Mink, writes vitriolic letters to local agricultural agents when the real object of his ire is his absent son. Loyal's brother sends off for an artificial arm to replace the one he lost in an accident; his sister answers a mail order ad for a husband. Through the mail, Proulx inventively reveals the inchoate longings of a difficult existence in this winner of the 1993 PEN/Faulkner Award.ExtraitChapter 1: BloodEven before he got up he knew he was on his way. Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way. Even standing there on shaking legs, trying to push the copper buttons through the stiff buttonholes he knew that everything he had done or thought in his life had to be started over again. Even if he got away.He couldn't get any air, but stood on his knocked-out legs gasping and wheezing.

It was like he'd taken a bad fall. Dazed. He could feel the blood hammering in his throat. But there was nothing else, only the gasping for breath and an abnormal acuity of vision. Mats of juniper flowed across the field like spilled water; doghair maple crowded the stone wall wavering through the trees.He'd thought of the wall walking up the slope behind Billy, thought of it in a common way, of working on it sometime, setting back in place the stones that frost and thrusting roots had thrown out. Now he saw it as a scene drawn in powerful ink lines, the rock fissured with crumpled strings of quartz, humps of moss like shoulders shrugging out of the mold, black lignum beneath rotten bark, the aluminum sheen of deadwood.A stone the size and shape of a car's backseat jutted out of the wall, and below it was a knob of soil that marked the entrance to an abandoned fox den. Oh Jesus, it wasn't his fault but they'd say it was. He grasped Billy's ankles and dragged her to the wall. He rolled her up under the stone, could not look at her face. There was already a waxiness to her body. The texture of her bunched stockings, the shape of her nails glowed with the luminous hardness that marks the newly dead in the moment before the flames consume or the sucking water pulls them under. The space beneath the rock was shallow. Her arm fell outward, the hand relaxed, the fingers curled as if she held a hand mirror or a Fourth of July flag.Instinctively he translated the withering shock into work, his answer to what he did not want to understand, to persistent toothache, hard weather, the sense of loneliness. He rebuilt the wall over her, fitting the stones, copying the careless, tumbled fall of rock. A secretive reflex worked in him. When she was locked away in the wall he threw on dead leaves, tree limbs and brush, raked the drag marks and scuffed ground with a branch.Down the back fields, keeping to the fence line, but sometimes staggering onto open ground. No feeling in his legs. The sun was going down, the October afternoon collapsing into evening. The fence posts on the margins of the fields glinted like burnished pins, the thick light plated his face with a coppery mask.Grass eddied around his knees, the purple awns burst, scattering a hail of seed. Far below he saw the house varnished with orange light, balanced against the grove of cottonwoods, like a scene etched on a metal plate. The sag of the roof curved into shadows as delicate as a bloom of mold, thickening the trees.In the orchard he knelt and wiped his hands over and over in the coarse grass. The trees were half wild with watersprouts and deadwood. The mournful smell of rotted fruit came into his nose. "If I get away," he said, dragging breath into his constricted throat, and briefly seeing, not what had happened up beside the wall, but his grandfather spraying the tree with Bordeaux mixture, the long wand hissing in the leaves, the poisoned codling moths bursting up like flames, the women and children, himself, on the ladder picking apples, the strap of the bag cutting into his shoulder, the empty oak-splint baskets under the trees and the men loading the full baskets into a wagon, the frigid packing room, old Roseboy with his sloping, bare neck and his dirty hat, pointed like a cone, nothing but a trimmed-up old syrup filter, tapping on the barrel heads, serious, saying over and over, "Take it easy now, one rotten apple spoils the whole goddamn barrel."Evening haze rose off the hardwood slopes and blurred a sky discolored like a stained silk skirt. He saw and heard everything with brutal clarity; yet the thing that had happened up beside the wall was confused. Coyotes singling along the edge of the duck marsh called in fluming howls. Wet hand ticking the skeletal bean poles, he walked through the withered garden. Moths like pinches of pale dust battered in his wake.At the corner of the house he stopped and urinated on the blackened stalks of Jewell's Canterbury bells. The seed husks rattled and a faint steam rose in the trembling shadow of his legs. His clothes had no warmth. The grey work pants, knees stained with soil, were stippled with grass heads and bramble tips, his jacket spattered with shreds of bark. His neck stung from her raking

scratches. A gleaming image of her fingernails swerved into his mind and he clamped it off. The cedar waxwings rustled stiff leaves with a sound of unfolding tissue paper. He could hear Mink's voice in the kitchen, lumps of sound like newly plowed soil, and the flat muffle of Jewell, his mother, answering. Nothing seemed changed. Billy was somehow up there under the wall, but nothing seemed changed except the uncanny sharpness of his vision and the tightness that gripped somewhere under his breastbone. A length of binder twine hung with bean plants sagged between the two porch pillars, and he could see each hemp fiber, the shadows in the folds of each desiccated leaf, the swell of the seed inside the husks. A broken pumpkin, crusted on its underside with earth, parted like a mouth in a knowing crack. His foot crushed a leaf as he opened the screen door. Wire egg baskets were stacked in the corner of the entry. Water had drained from a basket half full of pale eggs and pooled under Mink's barn boots. The reeking barn clothes, Dub's jacket, his own denim coat with the pocket gaping open like a wound, dangled from nails. He scraped his shoes on the wad of burlap sacks and went in. "About time. You, Loyal, you and Dub can't get to the table on time we're not waitin.' Been sayin' this since you was four years old." Jewell pushed the bowl of onions toward him. Her hazel eyes were lost behind the glinting spectacles. The ridge of muscle that supported her lower lip was as stiff as wood. The white plates made a circle around the kitchen table, the shape echoed in the curve of pease around Mink's mouth. There was stubble on his face, his finely cut lips were loosened by missing teeth. The dull silver lay on the yolk-colored oilcloth. Mink clenched the carving knife, sawed at the ham. The ham smelled like blood. Cold air crawled along the floor, the ferret scurried in the wall. On a hill miles away an attic window caught the last ray of light, burned for a few minutes, dimmed. "Pass the plates." Mink's voice, gone thin since his tractor accident a few years ago, seemed caught in some glottal anatomic trap. He tensed his neck, creased across the back with white lines, and cut at the ham. The label on his overall bib read TUF NUT. The red slices fell away from the knife onto the platter, the glaze crackled by heat in crazy hairlines. The knife was thin-bladed, the steel sharpened away. Mink felt its fragility against the ham bone. Such a worn blade could easily break. His pallid gaze, blue as winter milk, slid around the table. "Where's Dub? Goddamn knockabout." "Don't know," Jewell said, hands like clusters of carrots, shaking pepper out of the glass dog, straight in the chair, the flesh of her arms firm and solid. "But I'll tell you something. Anybody that's late to supper can go without. I cook supper to be eat hot. And nobody bothers to take the trouble to set down when it's ready. Don't care who it is, they're not here they can forget it. Don't care if it's Saint Peter. Don't care if Dub's gone off again. Thinks he can come and go as he pleases. He don't care for nobody's work. I don't care if it's Winston Churchill with his big greasy cigar wants to set clown to dinner, we're not waitin' for nobody. If there's something left he can have it, but don't expect nothing to be saved." "I don't expect it," said Mernelle, squinting her eyes. Her braids were doubled in loops bound with rubber bands that pulled painfully when they were worked loose at night, the teeth too big for the face. She had the family hands with crooked fingers and flat nails. She had Mink's diffident slouch. "Nobody is talking to you, miss. You make some money on the milkweed pods and you've got to put your two cents in on every subject. How money does change a person. Glad I haven't got any to spoil me." "I got more good stuff goin' on than milkweed pods," said Mernelle scornfully. "I got three big things this week. I got six dollars for the milkweed pods, I got a letter from Sergeant Frederick Hale Bottum in New Guinea because he read my note with the Sunday school cigarettes, and our class is goin' to see the rubber show in Barton. On Friday." "How many milkweed pods you picked for that six dollars?" Mink pulled off his barn cap and hung it on the chair's ear. A leak of hair hung down and he continually jerked his head to the left to get it out of his way. "Hundreds. Thousands. Thirty bags. And guess what, Da, some of the kids turned in milkweeds that was still green, and they only give 'em ten cents a bag. I let mine get all nice and dry up in the hayloft first. The only one picked more than me was a old man from Topunder. Seventy-two bags, but he didn't have to go to school. He could just fool around pickin' milkweed all day long." "I wondered what in the hell all them milkweed pods was doin' spread out over the floor up there. First I thought it was some idea Loyal had for cheap cowfeed. Then I thought they was goin' to be some kind of a decoration." "Da, they don't make decorations out of milkweed pods." "Hell they don't. Milkweed pods, pinecones, spools, popcorn, apples, throw some paint on it, that's it. I seen women and girls make a goddamn hay rake into a decoration with crepe paper and poison ivy." The door opened a few inches and Dub's florid big-cheeked face thrust into the kitchen. In the thicket of his curly hair a bald spot appeared like a clearing in the woods. He pretended to look around guiltily. When his eyes came to Jewell's he twisted up his mouth in mock fear, sidling into the room with his arm crooked across his face as if to ward off blows. His thighs were heavy and he had the short man's scissory walk. He knew he was the fool of the family. "Don't hit me, Ma, I'll never be late again.

Couldn't help it this time. Hey, I got talkin' with a fella, said his uncle was one of the ones that was up on Camel's Hump where that bomber went down, looking for the survivors of the crash?" "For pity's sake," said Jewell. Dub turned his chair around and straddled it, his good arm across the back, the empty left sleeve, usually tucked in his jacket pocket, hanging slack. A Camel cigarette balanced behind his right ear. For an instant Jewell remembered how shapely his forearms had been, the swelling flexors and the man's veins like tight fine branchwood. Mink cut a slice of ham into pieces and scraped them onto Dub's plate. The kitchen seemed to Loyal to be falling outward like a perspective painting, showing the grain of the ham, the two shades of green of the wallpaper ivy, the ears of drying popcorn joined together in a twist of wire hanging over the stove, the word COMFORT on the oven door, Jewell's old purse nailed to the wall to hold bills and letters, the pencil stubs in the spice can hanging from a string looped over a nail, Mernelle's drawing of a flag tacked to the pantry door, the glass doorknob, the brass hook and eye, the sagging string and stained cretonne covering the cavity under the sink, the wet footprints on the linoleum, all flat and detailed, but receding from him like torn leaves in a flooding river. It seemed he had never before noticed his mother's floral print apron, the solid way she leaned forward, her beaky nose and round ears. They had those ears, he thought, every one of them, forcing his mind away from what was up under the wall, and Mink's black Irish hair, so fine you couldn't see the single hairs. Dub heaped the mashed potato on his plate, poured the yellow gravy over it and worked it in with his fork. He stuck a lump of chewing gum on the edge of the plate. "Plane was all over the mountain. One wing clipped a part of the lion, and then it just end-overed, wings broke off here, tail farther down, cockpit belly-bunted half a mile down. Tell you what, they don't see how that guy lived through it, guy from Florida, just layin' on the snow, guts and arms and legs from nine dead men all around him, and all he had was a couple cuts and scrapes, nothing even broke. Guy never even see snow before." "What lion?" asked Mernelle, picturing the beast behind snowy rocks. "Ah, the top of the mountain, looks like a lion gettin' ready to jump, other guys thinks it looks like a part of a camel. The lion party wanted to call it 'crouchin' lion' but the camel lovers got their way. Camel's Hump. It's just stone up there, grade A granite. Looks like a pile of rock. Hey, don't look like a camel or a lion or a porcupine. Don't they learn you nothin' in school?" "Seems like it's been a terrible time the last year or so for terrible things. The War. The Chowder Girl stabbing that needle in her eye. That was terrible. That poor woman in the bathtub in the hotel." Jewell unleashed one of her gusty sighs and stared away into the sad things that happen, that she guiltily savored. Her eyes were half closed, her thick wrists resting on the edge of the table, fork lying across her plate. "What about the fool things," said Mink, the words tangled in his mouth with potato and ham, the stubbled cheeks flexing as he chewed, "what about that fool that brought the can of blasting powder into the kitchen and put a match to it to see if it would burn. A fool thing, and half the town on fire on account of it and him and his brother's whole family dead or torn up." "What the hell is this?" said Dub, pulling something from the mashed potato on his plate. "What the hell is this?" holding up a bloodied Band-Aid. "Oh my lord," said Jewell, "Throw it out. Take some new potato. I cut my finger peelin' potatoes, then when I was settin' the table I see I lost the Band-Aid somewhere. Must of fell in the potatoes when I was mashin' 'em. Give it here," she said, getting up and scraping the potato in the pig's slop bucket. She moved with a quick step, her lace-up oxfords with the stacked heels showing off her small feet. "Thought for a minute there," said Dub, "that the taters had the rag on." "Dub," said Jewell. "I don't get it," said Mernelle. "I don't get what a bomber was doin' near the Camel's Hump. Is there Germans on the Camel's Hump?" Dub roared in his stupid way. Mernelle could see the thing at the back of his throat hanging down, the black parts of his teeth and the empty gums on the left where the train men had knocked his teeth out. "Don't worry about the Germans. Even if they made it across the ocean what the hell would they do up on Camel's Hump? 'Ach, Heinz, I am seeink der Blood farm und der dangerous Mernelle collecting ze milkveed pods.'" Dub's grin hung in his face like an end of wet rope. The food lay on Loyal's plate as Mink had sent it along, the ham hanging a little over the edge, the cone of potato rising, a single iceberg from a frozen sea. Loyal stood up, the yellow kerosene light reaching as high as his breast, his face shadowed. His leaf-stained fingers bunched, braced against the table. "Got something to say. Billy and me has had enough of this place. We're pullin' out tonight. She's waitin' for me right now. We're pullin' out and going out west, someplace out there, buy a farm, make a new start. She got the right idea. She says 'I'm not even goin' to try to see my folks. Suit me good if I never have to see one of them again.' She's just goin'. I wanted to set it straight with you, give you some idea. I didn't come back for no goddamn dinner. Didn't come back to listen to horseshit about Germans and potatoes. I come back to get my money and my car. Ask you to tell her folks she's gone. She don't care to see them." As he said it he knew that's what they should have done. It seemed so easy now he couldn't

understand why he'd fought the idea. There was a silence. A discordance spread around the table as though he had blindly hit piano keys with a length of pipe. Mink half-stood, the hair hung down over his eyes. "What in hell are you sayin'! This your idea of a joke? All I ever hear from you for ten years is how you think this place oughta be run, now you say just like you was talkin' about changin' your shirt that you're pullin' out? For ten years I been hearin' about what you wanted to do with this place, how you wanted to switch off the Jerseys over to Holsteins, 'get a milkin' machine after the War as soon's we get electricity in, specialize in dairy.' Get the pastures and hayfields up, alfalfa, build a silo, grow more corn, concentrate on commercial dairy farmin'. Profit. Put the time into dairyin', don't bother with no big garden, or pigs or turkeys, it's quicker and efficienter to buy your food. I can hear you sayin' it now. You said it until my ears turned blue.

Now this. You expect me to swallow this like sweet cake?" Hey, mister, tell you what else you said. You bitched and whined about the juniper movin' into the fields, talk half an hour about the orchard, suckers, deadwood, the bull spruce is chokin' out the spring in the pine tree corner you said, west hayfields ain't been cut in three year, full of cherry trash. That's what you said. Said you wished the day had forty hours of light so's you could get somethin' done." Loyal hardly heard him, but saw the rubbery folds from the wings of his nostrils to the corners of his mouth, saw the cords in Mink's neck, thought of the glistening strings just under the skin, thought of the arteries swelled with ropes of blood the size of his finger, thought of the crackling sound of rib bones when he kicked in a fox's chest. "You can't leave us run this farm alone," said Mink in his buzzing voice, the self-pity getting into his rage. "Jesus Christ, your brother's only got the one arm and my health is down since the damn tractor laid on my chest. I was up to my health I'd beat the shit out of you.

You're not worth a pig's patootie. You tell me how in the hell Dub and me can hand-milk nineteen cow alone, two of them damn Holsteins of yours, the one holds her milk back, and kicks. Christ I hate that cow's eyes. You son of a bitch, we just can't do it." "Goddamnit, the Holsteins are good-natured cows, better than them mean little Jerseys you got. They give damn near twice as much milk as any Jersey." He tumbled into the relief of the old argument. "Yes, and look how much they eat. And half the butterfat of the Jerseys. The Jerseys is made for this country. They can make out on thin pasture and keep a farm going. They're rugged. Tell you another thing. You just try walkin' off the farm they'll have your ass in uniform so fast it'll take your breath away. There's a War on, in case you forget. Farm work is essential work. Forget out west. Don't you read no papers? Don't you hear no radio programs? Them out west farms dried up and blowed away in the Dust Bowl. You're stayin'." Dub popped a wooden match with his thumbnail and lit his cigarette. "I got to go," said Loyal. "I got to. Oregon or Montana -- somewhere." "Put the record on again, Charlie," said Dub, "everybody likes to dance to that one." The smoke streamed out of his nose. Jewell put her hands to her cheeks and drew down on them, stretching her face and exposing the red inner lids of her eyes behind her glasses. "I don't know," she said. "What about the Army Dinner, we're puttin' on the Army Dinner Saturday night, the big beef stew dinner in the cafeteria style, Army style. I was expectin' you to take me down to the church on Saturday mornin'. You can stay for that. Billy's one of the ones that wears the chef's hats and ladles out the food. She has to stay for that." "It's on Billy's account we got to go tonight. There's certain reasons. No good to talk about it. I'm goin'." He leaned wildly at them, the black hair curling at the opening of his shirt where the blue-white skin showed. "Well Jesus Christ, I see the whole thing. You knocked her up.

She wants to clear out so nobody don't know. There's a word to describe a fella like you lets himself get backed into a ruddy corner where he can't turn around," the voice squeezed along, "but I won't say it in front of your mother and sister." "Hey, you leave, Loyal," said Dub, "you're finishin' off this farm." "Well I knew this was goin' to be like takin' a bath in boiled shit, but I didn't know it was goin' to be this bad. Can't you understand nothin'? I'm goin'." He ran up to the slant-ceilinged room he shared with Dub, leaving the ham on his plate, leaving his chair turned away from the table, leaving the fly-spotted mirror reflecting Mernelle's face. He hauled out the old valise, opened it and threw it onto the bed. And stood a long minute with the shirts bunched up in his hands, the valise gaping like a shout. Down there Mink was firing up, bellowing now, something smashing and rattling -- door to the pantry. Loyal dropped the shirts into the valise, and afterwards believed that was the moment when everything shifted, when the route of his life veered away from the main line, not when Billy slumped beneath his blind rutting, but as the shirts collapsed in their cotton limpness. He found Dub's bottle in a boot in the closet, tightened the cap and tossed it in, working the stiff strap through the valise buckle as he came down the stairs double-stride, hearing Mink hammering now, seeing the son of a bitch nailing the kitchen door shut. So he couldn't get out. He was across the room in a few seconds. He kicked out the window and stepped over the raking glass onto the porch, leaving it all, the trapline, the rough little Jerseys, the two Holsteins with their heavy flesh-colored udders, Dub's oily rags,

and the smell of old iron in the back of the barn, the wall up by the woods. That part of things was over. It was over in a rush. Down on the town road he thought it was a sour joke how things had turned out. Billy, always yapping about moving away, getting out, making a new start, was staying on the farm. He, whom never thought beyond the farm, never wanted anything but the farm, was on his way. Clenching the steering wheel. Something was sticking in his backside, and he felt around, grasped Mernelle's ocarina, the swirled novelty pattern of the Bakelite scarred from kicking around the floor. On the sides were decals of donkeys carrying panniers of cactus. He started to crank down the window to throw it out, but the window slipped off the rail again when it was only a crack open, and he threw the ocarina into the backseat. It was almost dusk, but at the low place where the meadows swept the trees off to the sides he pulled over to take a last look. But jammed the spurting flashes of what had happened. Had happened and was done. The place was as fixed as a picture on a postcard, the house and barn like black ships in an ocean of fields, the sky a membrane holding the final light, and there were the blurred kitchen windows, and up behind the buildings the field, the rich twenty-acre field propped open toward the south like a Bible, the crease of the water vein almost exactly in the center of the ten-acre pages. He fished in the valise and got Dub's bottle, swallowed the cold whiskey. Beautiful pasture, four or five years of his work to bring that field up, none of Mink's labor, his, draining the boggy place, liming and seeding to clover, plowing under the clover three years running to build up the soil, get the sourness out, then planting alfalfa and keeping it going, look at it, sweet good stuff, nutty, full of nourishment. That's what made those cows give the butterfat, nothing Mink did, but him, Loyal, the best pasture in the county. That was why he had wanted to go up above the junipers, even though Billy didn't care about the field and couldn't tell good fields from bad, not to do what she thought he wanted, but to look at his pasture from above. "I heard it all, now," she said. "Looks like any stupid old field to me." She shook her head. "I don't know if I can make something out of you or not, Loyal." The field looked like black-green fur in the dull light. "That's your last look," he said, laid Dub's bottle in the glove compartment and threw the car into first. Out of the corner of his eye he half-marked a white dot up in the field. Too big for a fox, wrong shape for a deer. And no stumps in that field. But he was fourteen miles away from home and half across the bridge, stepping gingerly on the brake to keep from hitting a burr-covered stray, before he figured it out. The dog. The dog was up in the field right where he'd told him to sit. Still waiting. Jesus Christ. Copyright 1992

by E. Annie Proulx