Five Easy Pieces
By Nate Langley

His hands were not hands so much as country long settled. Creased with riverbeds and marked by the hard ridges of the earth. Broad and split and weathered past any color a man is born with. His knuckles knotted like the burls on old spruce and nails as thick and ridged as horn. A white seam ran across the back of the left one where a cable had snapped many years ago and laid him open to the bone. He had sewn it himself with fishing line and gone back up the derrick before the blood froze. The last joint of his right ring finger was gone. In the creases of his palms the crude had settled so deep that no soap would ever reach it, so that his hands carried the black of the earth's oldest sin wherever he went.

He sat on an overturned bucket in the lee of the doghouse, the wind coming off the bow like something with a grievance. And he was mending a glove. Not his own. It belonged to the Murray boy, nineteen and three weeks on the Slope, who had torn the palm out of it on the catwalk and said nothing because he was ashamed. The old man worked bare-handed in forty below. He held the needle in his ruined fingers like it was a thing of great delicacy and drew the waxed thread through the leather, pulled it snug, and drew it through again. The stitches were small and even. He never hurried, and the cold never seemed to know he was there.

Past the rig the ice ran out flat and blue to the end of the world. Beyond that lay green islands where the air smells of flowers and no man has ever bled.

I crouched beside him out of the wind. *You ever think about it*, I asked. *Going down there someplace warm. Laying those hands in the sun for once?*

He didn't respond. Instead he tied the thread and bit it, then turned the glove in the faint light, working the new seam with his thumb. When he finished, he handed me the glove.

Boy'll need it by second shift, he said.

Then he stood and went back to work.