A tall man stood in the doorway. He held a crushed Stetson hat under his arm while

he combed his long, black, damp hair straight back. Like the others he wore blue

jeans and a short denim jacket. When he had fi nished combing his hair he moved

into the room, and he moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master

craftsmen. He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch, capable of driving ten,

sixteen, even twenty mules with a single line to the leaders. He was capable of killing

a fl y on the wheeler’s butt with a bull whip without touching the mule. There was a

gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke.

His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or

love. This was Slim, the jerkline skinner. His hatchet face was ageless. He might

have been thirty-five or fifty. His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow

speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought. His

hands, large and lean, were as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer.

He smoothed out his crushed hat, creased it in the middle and put it on. He looked

kindly at the two in the bunk house. ‘It’s brighter’n a bitch outside,’ he said gently.

‘Can’t hardly see nothing in here. You the new guys?’

‘Just come,’ said George.

‘Gonna buck barley?’

‘That’s what the boss says.’

Slim sat down on a box across the table from George. He studied the solitaire hand

that was upside down to him. ‘Hope you get on my team,’ he said. His voice was

very gentle. ‘I gotta pair of punks on my team that don’t know a barley bag from a

blue ball. You guys ever bucked any barley?’