THE CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS
Sam Shepard

The Play: The tale of a dysfunctional American family, the Tates, with enough food to keep from starving but not enough personal strength to fill the voids in other parts of their lives. The drunken dreamer of a father, Weston, and his burned-out wife, Ella, struggle to maintain their rundown family farm, but their search for freedom and security leads only to a bleak, empty future. Their precocious teenage daughter, Emma, rebels at the life with her family and meets a violent end, and her brother, the overly idealistic Wesley, unable to build the foundation his dreams require, is left with nothing more than a tortured vision of a cat tearing apart an eagle that has caught it in its talons.

Time and Place: 1978 (the present?); a small farm somewhere in the American West.

The Scene: Wesley is cleaning up shards of wood from the door his father broke down the night before during a drunken outburst. As his mother fries him some bacon for breakfast, he recalls the images going through his mind as he lay in bed listening to the splintering of the door.

WESLEY: (As he throws wood into wheelbarrow) I was lying there on my back. I could smell the avocado blossoms. I could hear the coyotes. I could hear stock cars squealing down the street. I could feel myself in my bed in my room in this house in this town in this state in this country. I could feel this country close like it was part of my bones. I could feel the presence of all the people outside, at night, in the dark. Even sleeping people I could feel. Even all the sleeping animals. Dogs. Peacocks. Bulls. Even tractors sitting in the wetness, waiting for the sun to come up. I was looking straight up at the ceiling at all my model airplanes hanging by all their thin metal wires. Floating. Swaying very quietly like they were being blown by someone’s breath. Cobwebs moving with them. Dust laying on their wings. Decals peeling off their wings. My P-39. My Messerschmitt. My Jap Zero. I could feel myself lying far below them on my bed like I was on the ocean and overhead they were on reconnaissance. Scouting me. Floating. Taking pictures of the enemy. Me, the enemy. I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something indescribable. Then I heard the Packard coming up the hill. From a mile off I could tell it was the Packard by the sound of the valves. The lifters have a sound like nothing else. Then I could picture my dad driving it. Shifting unconsciously. Dowshifting into second for the last pull up the hill. I could feel the headlights closing in. Cutting through the orchard. I could see the trees being lit one after the other by the lights, then going back to black. My heart was pounding. Just from my dad coming back. Then I heard him pull the brake. Lights go off. Key’s turned off. Then a long silence. Him just sitting in the car. Just sitting. I picture him just sitting. What’s he doing? Just sitting. Waiting to get out. Why’s he waiting to get out? He’s plastered and can’t move. He’s plastered and doesn’t want to move. He’s going to sleep there all night. He’s slept there before. He’s woken up with dew on the hood before. Freezing headache. Teeth covered with peanuts. Then I hear the door of the Packard open. A pop of metal. Dogs barking down the road. Door slams. Feet. Paper bag being tucked under one arm. Paper bag covering “Tiger Rose.” Feet coming. Feet walking toward the door. Feet stopping. Heart pounding. Sound of door not opening. Foot kicking door. Man’s voice. Dad’s voice. Dad calling Mom. No answer. Foot kicking. Foot kicking harder. Wood splitting. Man’s voice. In the night. Foot kicking hard through door.