

The background of the image is an abstract, textured composition. It features a mix of colors including deep blues, vibrant greens, and earthy yellows, all set against a darker, almost black base. The textures appear organic and layered, with some areas looking like marbled paper or perhaps a close-up of a natural surface like stone or wood. The overall effect is rich and complex, providing a strong visual backdrop for the text.

Tamara Linse

Deep

Down

Things

*Praise for Author*

***Tamara Linse***

“Linse writes as if flexing her own ranch-toned muscles, creating intense, original characters and letting them loose. The result could fill a novel—or two. All bodes well for Linse’s future work.”  
—Kirkus

“In this winning debut collection of short stories (*How to Be a Man*), Linse presents a vivid portrait of life in the American West. ... readers will be drawn in to the collection's world and will find themselves wanting to read more of Linse’s intimate tales.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Linse’s wide array of believable characters, and her ability to return to the same set of themes without becoming repetitive or predicative, makes her a notable literary force. ... HOW TO BE A MAN is a notable debut from a very promising writer.” —IndieReader

# Deep Down Things

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*Tamara Linse*



willow  
words

*For Alex, who would have been 18 this year,  
and Kelly, the woman who loved him*

**Also by Tamara Linse**

*How to Be a Man (stories)*

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*This is a work of fiction—names, characters, places, and events are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously*

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## God's Grandeur

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89)

## *Maggie*

Jackdaw isn't going to make it. I can tell by the way the first jump unseats him. The big white bull lands and then tucks and gathers underneath. Jackdaw curls forward and whips the air with his left hand, but his butt slides off-center. Thirty yards away on the metal bleachers, I involuntarily scoot sideways—as if it would do any good. The bull springs out from under Jackdaw and then arches its back, flipping its hind end.

Jackdaw is tossed wide off the bull's back. In the air he is all red-satin arms and shaggy-chapped legs but then somehow he grabs his black felt hat. He lands squarely on both feet, knees bent to catch his weight. Then he straightens with a grand sweep of his hat. Even from here you can see his smile burst out. There's something about the way he opens his body to the crowd, like a dog rolling over to show its belly, that makes me feel sorry for him but drawn to him too. With him standing there, holding himself halfway between a relaxed slouch and head-high pride, I can see why my brother Tibs admires him.

I haven't actually met Jackdaw before, but he and Tibs hang out together a lot, and they have some English classes together. I haven't run across him on campus.

The crowd on the bleachers goes wild. It doesn't matter that Jackdaw didn't stay on the full eight seconds. They holler and wolf-whistle and shake their programs. Their metallic stomping vibrates my body and brings up dust and the smell of old manure.

With Jackdaw off its back, the bull leaps into the air. It gyrates its hips and flips its head, a long ribbon of snot curling off its nostril and arcing over its back. Then it stops and turns and looks at Jackdaw. It hangs its head low. It shifts its weight onto its front hooves, butt in the air, and pauses. The clown with the black face paint and the big white circles around his eyes runs in front of the bull to distract it, but it shakes its head like it's saying no to dessert.

The crowd hushes.

Then, I can't believe it, Jackdaw takes a step toward the bull. The crowd yells, but not like a crowd, like a bunch of kids on a playground. Some holler encouragement. Others laugh. Some try to warn him. Some egg him on. My heart beats wild in my chest like when my sister CJ and I watch those slasher movies and Freddy's coming after the guy and you know because he's the best friend that he's going to get killed and you want to warn him. "Bastard deserved it," CJ always says, "for being stupid."

It's like Jackdaw doesn't know the bull's right there. He starts walking, not directly to the fence but at a slant toward the loudest of the cheers, which takes him right past the bull.

I turn to Tibs. “What’s he doing?”

“He knows his stuff,” Tibs says, his voice lower than normal. The look on his face makes me want to give him a hug, but we’re not a hugging family, so I nod, even though Tibs isn’t looking at me.

Tibs is leaning forward, his eyes focused on Jackdaw, his elbows on his knees, and his shoulders hunched. Tibs is tall and thin, and he always looks a little fragile, a couple of sticks propped together. His face is our dad’s, big eyes and not much of a chin, sort of like an alien or an overgrown boy. He has the habit of playing with his fingers, which he’s doing now. It’s like he wants to reach out and grab something but he can’t quite bring himself to. It’s the same when he talks—he’ll cover his mouth with his hand like he’s holding back his words.

Tibs is the tallest of us three kids—CJ, he, and I. CJ’s the oldest. I’m the youngest and the shortest. Grandma Rose, Dad’s mom, always said I got left with the leftovers. Growing up, it seemed like CJ and Tibs got things and were told things that I was too young to have or to know. It was good though, too, because when Dad and Mom got killed when I was sixteen, I didn’t know enough to worry much about money or things. They had saved up some so we could get by. But poor CJ. She in particular had to be the parent, but she was used to babysitting us and she was older anyway—twenty-two, I think.

Like that time when we were kids when CJ was babysitting and I got so sick. Turned out to be pneumonia. I don’t know where our parents were. Most likely, they were away on business, but it could have been something else. Grandma Rose had cracked her hip—I remember that—so she couldn’t take care of us, but it was only for a couple of days and CJ was thirteen at the time. In general, CJ had started ignoring us, claiming she was a teenager now and didn’t want to play with babies any more, like kids do, which really got Tibs, though he didn’t do much besides sulk about it. But that day she was playing with us like she was a little kid too.

We had been playing in an irrigation ditch making a dam. I pretended to be a beaver, and Tibs pretended to be an engineer on the Hoover Dam. I don’t remember CJ pretending to be anything, just helping us arrange sticks and slop mud and then flopping in the water to cool down. I started feeling pretty bad. Over the course of the day, I had a cough that got worse and then I got really hot and then really cold and my body ached. My lungs started wheezing when I breathed. I remember thinking someone had punched a hole in me, like a balloon, and all my air was leaking out. CJ felt my head and then felt it again and then grabbed my arm and dragged me to the house, Tibs trailing behind. All I wanted to do was lie down, but she bundled me in a blanket and put me in a wagon, and between them she and Tibs pulled me down the driveway and out onto the highway. We lived twelve miles from town, in the house where I live now. I don’t know why CJ didn’t just call 911. But here we were, rattling down the middle of the highway. A woman in a truck stopped and gave us a ride to the hospital here in Loveland. Can you imagine it? A skinny muddy thirteen-year-old girl in her brown bikini and her skinny nine-year-old brother, taller than her but no bigger around than a stick and wearing red, white, and blue swim trunks, hauling their

six-year-old sister through the sliding doors of the emergency room in a little red wagon. What those nurses must've thought.

On the bleachers, I glance from Tibs back out to Jackdaw. The bull doesn't know what's going on either. It shakes its lowered head and snorts, blowing up dust from the ground. Jackdaw bows his head and slips on his hat. Then the bull decides and launches itself at Jackdaw. Just as the bull charges down on Jackdaw, the white-eyed clown runs between him and the bull and slaps the bull's nose. Jackdaw turns toward them just as the bull plants its front feet, turns, and charges after the running clown.

Pure foolishness and bravery. My hands are shaking. I want to go down and take Jackdaw's hand and lead him out of the arena. A thought like a little alarm bell—who'd want to care about somebody who'd walk a nose-length from an angry bull? But something about the awkward hang of his arms and the flip of his chaps and the way his hat sets cockeyed on his head makes me want to be with him.

The clown runs toward a padded barrel in the center of the arena, his white-stockinged calves flipping the split legs of his suspended oversized jeans. He jumps into the barrel feet-first and ducks his head below the rim. The crowd gasps and murmurs as the charging bull hooks the barrel over onto its side and bats it this way and that for twenty yards. The bull stops and turns and faces the crowd, head high, tail cocked and twitching. He tips his snout up once, twice, and snorts.

While the bull chases the clown, Jackdaw walks to the fence and climbs the boards.

The clown pops his head out of the sideways barrel where he can see the bull from the rear. He pushes himself out and then scrambles crabwise around behind. He turns to face the bull, his hands braced on the barrel. The bull's anger still bubbling, it turns back toward the clown and charges. As the bull hooks at the barrel and butts it forward, the clown scoots backwards, keeping the barrel between him and the bull, something I'm sure he's done many times. He keeps scooting as the bull bats at the barrel. But then something happens—the clown trips and falls over backwards. The barrel rolls half over him as he turns sideways and tries to push himself up. The bull stops for a split second, as if to gloat, and then stomps on the clown's frantically scrambling body and hooks the horns on its tilted head into the clown's side, flipping the clown over onto his back.

Why do rodeo clowns do it? Put their lives on the line for other people? I don't understand it.

The pickup men on the horses are there, but a second too late. They charge the bull, their horses shouldering into it. They yell and whip with quirts and kick with stirrups boots. Tail still cocked, the reluctant bull is hazed away and into the gathering pen at the end of the arena. The metal gate clangs shut behind it.

Head thrown back and arms splayed, the clown isn't moving. Men jump off the rails and run toward him, and the huge doors at the end of the arena open and an ambulance comes in. It stops beside the clown. The EMTs jump out, pull out a gurney, and then huddle around the prone body. One goes back to the vehicle and brings some equipment. There's frantic activity, and with the help of the other men, they place him on the gurney and slide him into the ambulance. It pulls out the doors and disappears, and the siren wails and recedes.



Tibs stands up, looks at me, and jerks his head, saying *come on, let's go*. I stand and follow him.

## ***Tibs***

The clown. Such athleticism and courage. I hope he'll be all right.

But before that grim scene, my man Jackdaw. Spectacular, the manner with which he flourished his hat, James Bond-esque. His second ride ever, his second. He didn't best Father Time, *id est* stay mounted for eight seconds, but who cares?

Maggie and I connect with him behind the stalls. It's frigid outside, with burgeoning gunbarrel-gray clouds over the mountains to the west. Now, beyond the reach of the crowd, Jackdaw's glasses rest on his nose, ruining the film-star cowboy effect. It's humorous, really: only Jackdaw would place himself near-sightless in a ring with a thousand pounds of murderous Charlais in order to look the part.

Sure, Jackdaw isn't the clown, but nonetheless, he was in there, just as fearless. He'll do anything for the crowd. He's always the epicenter of things. If there's a group, his charisma pulls everyone into a vortex. He has this ideal of perfection, of what the world should become, and he must embody that and shape the world. This is why he started riding bulls, I think. He likes the black-and-white cut-and-dried nature of it. You win, you lose; perfection or death.

Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not gay—I'm attracted to girls. He's just cool, that's all.

Jackdaw's life, his goals, his quest, is much like Hemingway's. Hemingway did everything and went everywhere. He volunteered as an ambulance driver for the war in Spain; he lived, loved, and wrote in Paris; he hunted—for big game, but also for himself—in Africa; he tried his hand at bullfighting in Spain; he fished and adopted the war effort off Cuba; he lived—and died—in Idaho. But no matter his physical location, there was always a group with Hemingway at its vortex. Hemingway was courageous, though he was also a bit of a bumbler. Courage fascinated him. Most of all, he was brave to lay bare the warts and pimples of his life for all the world to see. He had the courage of brutal honesty. He put himself out there, made a decision, affected the world—I want to be more like them, like Jackdaw, like Hemingway.

Face serious, Jackdaw converses with this old guy near the corrals and flips his bull rope as Maggie and I approach. He says, "See you later, Dick," to the gentleman, and then all three of us walk to his gear bag.

"Jackdaw, my man," I say, "you were looking good."

"Two seconds worth of good," Jackdaw says.

"No, man. You didn't stay on for the required eight seconds, but I bet your style points exceeded everyone else's."

“I don’t know. All the style in the world, but if you can’t get the job done.”

We’re all quiet for a long minute. I don’t know about Jackdaw and Maggie, but the fate of the clown leaps to my mind. The way he didn’t move, not even to curl in pain. It did not bode well for him. I wonder briefly if Jackdaw feels any responsibility, but then I am pulled back into the present by the silence.

“Jackdaw. I would like to introduce my sister Maggie,” I say and glance at her. She’s pretty—not beautiful, not handsome, but pretty—standing there with her gold-red locks glowing in the sunlight, her frame so small and slight. She’s curvaceous, though, and her pale skin is dotted with freckles. Her iridescent green eyes appear tinted by contacts, but they are genuine. One thing you can say about Maggie—she’s genuine. Naively so. Not that she hasn’t dated. I imagine it’s because she’s so intent on pleasing everyone. She’s just got the freshness and gleaming health of a Mormon girl—except, I don’t know, purer.

“Maggie, I would like to introduce Jackdaw.”

“Hi,” Maggie says.

“Hey,” Jackdaw says. A change comes over him. His face smooths out and opens up. “Maggie,” he says, as if he’s tasting the word.

Maggie looks at him, though I cannot read her expression. Her eyes are on him but she has this thoughtfulness too.

I turn to Maggie. “Did I tell you, Jackdaw attends my nineteenth century lit class?”

“Do you do cowboy poetry, like Baxter Black?” she says.

Jackdaw is about to say something, but I cut in, “Maggie. Have you ever heard of a literature professor addressing cowboy poetry?” I turn to Jackdaw. “East coast and mid-Fifties is as close as they come to Colorado.” I hear my own tone and immediately regret saying it. I force myself to laugh.

Maggie starts to say something and then stops and presses her lips together.

“Do you mean do I write cowboy poetry?” Jackdaw says.

Maggie glances at me as she says, “Yeah.”

“I’ve written cowboy poetry. But mostly I write political poetry, poetry that makes a statement, protest poetry, right Tibs?” Leaning toward her, he glances sideways at me.

I’m not sure what he’s talking about.

He smiles and continues. “I’m all about justice and freedom. Taking it to the man. Fighting for the little guy—or gal. Yeah, that’s me.”

“Like songs?” Maggie says.

“No, limericks.” He stands up straight, puffs out his chest, and recites, “There once was a man from Colorado, who was scared of his own shadow, he went when he came, each time just the same, to the relief of the women he’d had, though.” He tilts his head in my direction, and looks at me over his glasses. “Eh, Tibs, ol’ boy?”

Maggie laughs quietly under her breath. I shake my head but have to laugh too.

*Tibs*

“So Maggie,” Jackdaw says as he coils his bull rope, “how’d you turn out so pretty, having a brother with such an ugly mug?” He ties the rope with a scrap of leather.

She smiles broadly and looks at me.

He continues, “You must’ve had a very pretty mailman.” He purses his lips and rolls his eyes.

“You must’ve had a butt-ugly mailman,” I say, “either that or your old man looks like Peter Boyle.”

“Good one,” he says and holds out his fist. I bump it with mine.

“Hey, how about some lunch?” I say. “We could go to the concessions stand for a hotdog.”

Maggie nods.

“I could down a dog,” Jackdaw says, kneeling to tuck his rope into his green canvas gear bag.

## *Jackdaw*

Well, ain't she as pretty as a picture?

Maggie. Have you seen those paintings of pioneer women? Standing beside their man, their faces tilted upwards like they can see heaven. The winds whipping the women's skirts. A fat baby on a hip and a boy in shortpants and girl with braids nearby. A Conestoga wagon and cows and horses so muscled they could've been painted by an old master. They're what women are supposed to be. That's what I think of when I see Maggie.

Tibs, Maggie, and I go back inside the arena and stand in line at the concessions stand. Luckily it's not a long line—I pulled something in my ankle with that landing out in the dirt. Tibs orders a polish sausage with mustard and sauerkraut, Maggie orders a corn dog, and I order a foot-long with jalapenos and nacho cheese, and then I pay for it with my last ten dollars. We sit around a folding table and eat. I make a show of opening my mouth as big as Dallas and shoving in as much dog as I can. Maggie, shaking her head, watches me and nibbles her corn dog. Tibs tells a story about the time I got everyone in a literature class to vote to read Louis L'Amour. The teacher nixed it, though.

“Tell Maggie about the time your dad had you wrestle a pig,” Tibs says.

I lick my fingers and swallow the last of the dog. “Well, okay. My dad was a hard ass.” I pause. “Still is, I imagine.” They're both focused on me, which makes me feel good.

“You imagine?” Maggie says.

“Haven't seen him in a while. He'd say things like, ‘Toughen up, boy. No place in this world for a pansy ass.’” As I say it, I can hear his voice in my head, and my stomach knots.

I get an image of him standing over me, his voice surrounding us, a thing all its own. I'm on the ground, and I can feel the cold dirt clods digging into my back as I try to sink into the ruts in the road to the barn. My skull is ringing where he rapped me upside the head because—I don't know because. If I thought I had a reason one time, it didn't work to try to avoid it the next time. It was almost like he didn't want me to guess, so he could keep at it. But there I am, seeing stars too. Some people think it's just a saying—seeing stars—but you really do when you get your clock cleaned. They're little blue twinkle lights that flit mosquito-like around your face. There's something wet on my chin. Later, I'll figure out it's blood from where I lit on my nose when he punched me. I'm hoping he won't stomp on me, and in my mind I see myself like a cur dog, rolling over and fawning because it's afraid of its master. And then I hate myself and push up to standing, even though I know what he's going to do. He's going to hit me again. Which he does.

Maggie and Tibs are looking at me, so, to cover, I say, “He’d do things like have me run along behind the car on the way home and yell at me, ‘Keep up, boy.’” I laugh. Tibs chuckles.

“That’s awful,” Maggie says, all serious.

“Aw, it was all right. Made me the Clint Eastwood you see before you.” I hold my hands up like a pistol. “Go ahead, punk—”

Tibs chimes in, “Make my day.” We’re laughing.

“Oh,” Tibs says, “I tried being reasonable, I didn’t like it.”

I say, “How about, ‘There’s two kinds of people in this world. Those with loaded guns, and those who dig. You dig.’”

Tibs is way into it, but I’m losing Maggie. She’s shaking her head and staring down at the remains of her lunch. I reach over and push her shoulder. She smiles. “Clint doesn’t light your fire?” I push her shoulder harder this time, so that she almost tips over. I make my voice high, ““Oh, Clint, you’re such a strapping hunk of a man,’ admit it.”

She laughs. “Tibs went on a Clint Eastwood kick when he was in high school,” she says. “We must’ve watched *Pale Rider* a thousand times.”

“At least once too few,” Tibs says.

“So you watch chick flicks?” I say. ““Oh, Rhet, please come and sa-a-ave meh.””

Tibs laughs.

Maggie says, “It’s better than blowing people away left and right. They’re about things that matter, like love and family.”

I lean forward, and I can smell Maggie’s perfume—it’s something flowery but deeper. “Come on, admit it. There’s days when you’d like to take somebody out. Everybody run, Maggie’s got a gun.”

“No, not really,” Maggie says.

“Sorry, Jackdaw,” Tibs says, “I’ll have to back her up on this one. I’ve done my share of tormenting her over the years, and she’s always turned proverbial cheek. Even to CJ, our sister, who can be quite trying.”

“So we have a saint in our midst,” I say. “I’m going to have to hang around you more often. Maybe some of it will rub off on me.” And as I say it, I really mean it.

As we get up to leave, gathering our paper plates, Tibs says, “You never told the pig story.”

“That’s all right,” I say. “Somehow I don’t think it’s Maggie’s kind of story.”

## *CJ*

I should've brought Maggie with me, then maybe I wouldn't feel quite so shitty. But she was going to something today, a rodeo I think, with Tibs. Besides, I haven't told her anything about this crap.

I sit on the exam table in the small examination room, still in the awkward drafty gown, and my butt sticks to the vinyl. The room is chilly and smells like abrasive cleaning fluid.

"Are you okay?" the doctor asks me. He's a nice guy, and over the past couple of months I've gotten to know him way too well. He looks like an aging football player—a few pounds overweight but still carrying himself well. His breath always smells like spearmint and cigarettes.

"Fuck you," I say.

He snorts and then catches himself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laughed."

"No. Laughing's about right," I say. "God's one twisted motherfucker. Good thing I don't believe in Him." I push off the table with a scraping sound as my skin separates from the plastic. Cool air whispers through the slit in the back of the gown and makes me aware of how naked I am.

His voice deepens as he shifts into support mode. "Would you like to talk with one of our grief counselors? We have an infertility support group that meets every other Thursday. Would you like that contact number?"

My turn to snort. "I don't need a dozen other poor bastards like me sniveling in their cups. That's what the bar's for. Besides, they're just infertile. I'm fucking sterile." I shrug. "Naw. I'm all right."

### *End of Sample*

*Available for sale in paperback and digital formats at most online bookstores.*

## About the Author



Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she’s been thankful for ever since. In high school, she was rodeo queen, placed in a poetry contest, and waitressed.

She put herself through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor’s and master’s in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called Literature and the Land, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. They went through five miscarriages before the twins were born with the help of a wonderful woman who acted as a gestational carrier.

Tamara writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara’s website, [www.tamaralinse.com/](http://www.tamaralinse.com/), and her blog, Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl, at [tamara-linse.blogspot.com](http://tamara-linse.blogspot.com). You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on [Facebook](#) and [Google+](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#), and if you see her in person, please say hi. She really means it.

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