Where the river broke down | poems ; Mauvaisterre | a novella

Robert Sims Reid

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WHERE THE RIVER BROKE DOWN: POEMS

MAUVAISTERRE: A NOVELLA

By

Robert Sims Reid

B.A., University of Illinois, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1977

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date July 4, 1977
This collection is for Gayle,
who should have known better.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WHERE THE RIVER BROKE DOWN
This ridge's built of knives and plows
and a man called Kincaid took care of his own.
Hunting Indians here, I crept over leaves
until quail jumped at the sun, wheeled
loud and fat down the ravine.
Over there, at the edge of our farm,
the hired man caught Beatrice Kincaid
beautiful and easy to kill.
Perhaps his feet tramped a slow circle
around the stock tank and when her face
fell under water, he dreamed a name,
a woman from Bluffs who laughed
at his clothes and stretched a smooth leg
along her brocade couch. You can see home
from here. Clouds drop low in November,
and north on the levee you'll find bare dirt
where the river broke down. Big ugly river,
a sound you can take to bed in the winter
when wind bats the house and old friends
wander room to room, calling you out to play.
If we hold hands and pretend we're not afraid,
the road back will lead us to a lake.
AT THE EDGE OF DARBY

You left town, Henry, that first drunk night. With shoes balanced on railroad tracks, home trembled in leather. Kicked in the head by a horse, you heard bells for the first time, danced the champagne blues. Why go back to Darby where the red house grabs you by the throat? That town's the history of gray people who believe in answers, gauge time in arthritic pain, think polka is ballet.

You were never one for euphemisms, were you Henry? But we did good deeds for the old folks that Sunday. Your heels echoed with mine on slick linoleum. We watched the white haired man converse with the radio. I called it convalescent care. You named it cruel when children crowned the old woman Miss Senior Citizen, tied pink ribbons to her scalp, celebrated her luck to be alive. I called it ripe old age. You damned it all decrepit and sick.

Isn't it wrong, Henry, that pretty girls grow up to watch Merv Griffin, toss like dolls in cold beds and cry about the kids who ran away one Sunday? I should drag you back to Darby, make you face the music that was in us all along. Or maybe it's just our nature to crouch at the far edge, testing the strength of a wish. Do you ever wonder, Henry, who lives in the red house that guards the city limits?
During the wreck, I find Rusty like this: the leg an awkward tilt of bone, suspended, graceful in that frail moment before it stumbles and fire chews the field, one hand falters on wood. How do you cope with destroyed engines, smug chrome, a non-mechanical brain? Some things even good luck can’t change. An arm drops in slow motion toward a long night of strangers and speed.

Suppose you only pump gas and fix tires if they’re not too flat. Allowed on the team, you were confused. Blue coat plus white A wouldn’t add up to star. But, Rusty, you made us feel strong after bad games. You made our tired girls laugh with your staggered dance.

Where do you go when you’re too old to tease and there’s nothing left but the wrong wrench cold and snug in your hand?

I need help for this desperate breakdown. Behind me, that town I call home is dim, remote from small disasters. I’ll never have enough tools to mend fractured dreams of clutch homers that win the game. Understand: sometimes it’s right to need and fear dark. Cars hate me, Rusty, and I’m glad.
FARMING WITH MY BROTHER

I waited ten years to dig your picture from my drawer. It's convenient to say the past is ashes, that tonight is cold and my attic sags under bad jokes, romance and too much whiskey. But it's hard, this running from tall corn, the cattle stark and red against hills. I study your anxious eyes and wonder if someday I'll come to terms with old. Will I find strength in rock and silence along the Divide? Will you come West?

Children dream of firemen and cowboys who drink soda pop. We never start out needing to be villains or fire. Alone on the farm I play Alamo. I'm Davy Crockett hiding in a ditch, listening to gunfire and my sidekick play his harmonica. The good guys are all me. The cornfield Mexican troops. We wait to fire our muskets, die, and start the game again. One day I play Mexican. I speak great Spanish and jump strong into the empty ditch.

Charles, at night I feel the pull of rivers anchor me against the awful trek home. I'm too long away from lonely rooms where love depends on blood, and tomorrow is one more part in a broken machine. I've watched you grow cracked and white from hope. Fools run to mountains or become farmers. It's left for us to share that space deep in clay at the tip of roots: We are alive. We plow dirt and dreams.
ST. LOUIS & POINTS EAST

Fog splatters along the wing.
St. Louis. Dawn. My mind
ticks off details, like baggage,
quick stop at the bar. Funeral.
Minutes out of Lambert
I crush the last cigarette
and stare at the book cover,
the pork pie hat and baggy coat,
face reminding me of bad sky
in the dark over Wichita
and Chandler saying, Dead men
are heavier than broken hearts.

This terminal wasn't made
for trains. No mysterious blonde
will stand hip-deep in steam,
her arms poised and alive,
cleanly drawn through the band of heat
that ripples off the engine.
I left you, lovely, at 3 a.m.
in Phoenix, left you unsolved,
your face fluid behind plate glass.

I could come home in July
and still feel cold and afraid
as Alton streets in '68,
the first flight out of Lambert
and that man sprawled on a tavern step,
dead eyes fastened to his life
seeping along the concrete
toward Mississippi docks.
A boy waved his empty hands
and ran guilty through the snow.
RELATIVES FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

I watch them pose here on the wall outside County Court, a twin row of the dead long and near, lulling me with that earnest glance, vibrant vision burning toward the Argonne. Sent off by songs, they sang Cohan and in this spangled light, I think them boys again, these honest men wearing creased caps. Cousin Chet sailed in Texas, pale sea beaten deaf by tons of iron, a gold watch counting days back to Decatur.

And which pose took them under ground after the last assault by stars? Maybe when the women shucked corn for Uncle Sam, the world was small, candy made common sense with flags and parades. The men were all young when I was younger. We dazzled north on North Main, a summer noon before palsy caught Dutch's hands.

Grandpa Smoke could not pity birds and loved baseball. We cheered Stan the man and everybody said Shoendienst kept a home in White Hall.

Joe, Joe, your son-in-law got fired from Standard Oil. He drank Celia's life like beer. I can't make treaties with the dead, let alone Ricky. Living in the East for vaudeville, he came back once, a bamboo cane beating streets blue all over town.
Anna Mae was a teacher here before they bought the farm in Barry. Pigeons cruise home above maples and my father lost a hand in the fourth field past Dahman's place. Today, this school's about lumber and bricks. All the children are gone, you see, and today the clouds say New Orleans. Otis died. They found Anna Mae talking to snow, her atlas a bent road back to this district. Who was the last little girl to flip her skirts in this yard and turn west for Winchester, stale job at the courthouse, where dumb walls wait behind pictures of soldiers and records went wrong? If names are lost, we'll wake to wild dogs that mangle Ed Leech's calves, and pinch his face happy, the way water's pinched without color downstream from the locks at Alton. I've touched a stone carved by some war called Blackhawk and found a dream that can't forget Thursday. Daddy hunted sleep with a shotgun, his left arm ending in a twist of steel.
HORSES

Why's Dr. Black's office white? You can't tie shoes with one hand and the nurse looks kind as that field behind Gordon's old house, where the picker stopped, lunged full the last time. How can chameleons grow new tails? Mud's never fair and if crops fail, Big Branch bleeds this land clean of pain, they still want to know who pays when medicine don't work. I need running wild with horses to country that's green and not green remembered. God, the ground shakes toward Jacksonville, the railway crew that believed guns in Nichols Park and my wife dancing, dancing on through the crippled night.
FAMILY REUNION

This one waits in white cells of light beside the gardenias. Her cane gouges weeds in the flower bed, as though wood were somehow bone, worms mere casualties of hoe and spade. In the long-forgotten summer of dark fires on the river, Grace had a horsey laugh, soft belly, hands made to hammer. I was ten when I found her book of birds--owl perched above rabbit, fresh muscle staring from page. Sister Sarah is beautiful in the picture she keeps hidden under her bed.

I never knew the sisters young at the picnic. In better times the pond wasn't choked by lilies, Cousin Raymond's Hawaiian shirt blossomed on the coal-crested ridge that sweeps the Union Pacific out of Jacksonville. My father had both arms and Sarah, Sarah, Sarah with the faded rose lips was yet to say he'd be better dead.

I've stood in that Mausoleum and listened for a way to love lilies. Once, it was important that stone shelves were dry and flowers freshened on every holiday, mahogany and brass kept smooth. Please give me time, family, to walk alone in rain, step from Diamond Grove onto streets where the wind says have fun. Have fun. Those old bones will wait forever.
IN THE OLD COUNTRY

Isn't it simple when wishes come true?
In my mind, there's a white place painted
with this: One Christmas looking up
over coffee and outside the kitchen
our cat hangs from a tree. Snow draped white
on white fur, head a sick angle to the rope.
I've thought years about killing. Did the ground
grow when I moved the knife? When that carcass
dropped into a drift? And what game
did the animal stalk, legs frozen in a crouch
on lean Christmas air?
Too many springs I've cut the last land
through gumbo and watched my work
laid by, timber soil lost to wind at each
turn of the moldboard. Geography didn't fail.
Dust has its own drama drifting on the victrola,
locusts their own need. One July night
my wife turned from loving in that house
and the moon caught her face, her hip
arched under the damp sheet. In the old country
our name means Red. Like deer maybe, terrified
in some vague glen where the running started
and running on in a wild man's heart
past Chanderville and further by train
to Winchester, where he bought six chairs,
a table, and said this will have to do.
HONEYMOON, VINTAGE 1910

Here's Aunt Grace's trunk,
basic, brown, sentimental token
of a honeymoon. She knew how to keep
a man after forty eight hours on the train
through Audubon country, sad Smokies
full of kids grown on coal dust and God,
fathers who worry hands turned blunt
by tools and money and women a blur
inside the soft hush of greenery
on the line. She loved the way relics
bind a man to acres and the kettle
announcing Bible Circle and tea.

Let's say you drop this trunk
in the Atlantic off North Carolina
and it's hauled aboard a ketch
bound for Jamaica. Pirates don't care
how long a new bride mourns her trousseau.
Pirates are mean and they sell her trunk
to a Portuguese junkman for gold
and three stories about the market,
the green-eyed wench, the fat dealer in hogs.
Too soon, the trunk is home, safe by your bed,
bearing lonely tags that say Brazil,
Spain, Morocco and Errol Flynn.

Last time in Illinois
the woods were cramped, tree with that funny bend
too small for a throne and Mauvaisterre Creek
deserves its name, gone stale with tin cans
and toys dumped in the wash. You always knew
you'd find the best girl and lead her
to that tree, show her the broken fence,
beautiful snags and when animals
come out at night you don't need a house,
your blood won't crawl at the sound of geese
flying together in the dark.
MAUVAISTERRÉ
Six men were at the opposite end of the bar and it seemed to Willie Hardwick that he sat on the light end of a scales. The men were all turned away from him, looking up at the TV mounted in the corner. There was the sound of men talking and horses running and the blue-gray light played on the glassware. Behind him, the room was dark and quiet. Willie didn't have to turn and look to know that it was empty. You just get a feeling for things like that, like knowing when it's going to rain, or being able to tell what night a calf will drop without counting days or calling a vet. The man at the far end of the bar, the man nearest the TV, moved his right hand back to his hip and rested it on the white pearl handle of a gun.

"I hear this might be the last year for Gunsmoke," Sally Quinlin said, "so don't any of you even think about football. Football's a game for sissies."

The other men in the Exeter Hotel bar laughed. They were about Quinlin's age, late forties, early fifties, and probably knew from other nights, other heroes, the odd habits of the law in Exeter, Illinois. But Sally Quinlin had tried too many times to get Willie
in jail and Willie kept out of his way. Tonight, though, they sat at the same bar. Willie remembered how once, nearly ten years ago, when they were still in high school, he'd told Darrall Crawford what it was like to be the local trash and Darrall thought it was funny.

"Another?"

Now, Darrall was dead.

"Another?"

Willie looked up at Millard Dunson and said, "Some­day I'm going to get me one of those Hamm's Beer bears and turn him loose in here. Right in the middle of Gunsmoke."

"What's with you, Digger?" Millard leaned against the liquor cabinet and rested his white sleeves on a full, plaid vest. "Am I going to get trouble from you again?"

"Not if you lay off with that 'Digger' business," Willie said. He set his glass on the bar and slowly ran a finger around the rim. "You know, they say real crystal will kind of sing when you do it like this." He dipped his finger in the beer and again circled the lip of the silent glass. "This is a long way from crystal, Millard."

Dunson laughed and shock waves rippled along the vest. "Any bears there ever were around here are a
long time killed off." Millard was like a huge bag of skin stuffed with wet sand and topped off with curly blond hair that followed closely after the bears. "And you wouldn't know crystal from your granddad's glass eye," he said from somewhere behind his blank face, "Digger."

"Millard, it's a commercial and we're dry down here." As you would expect, the shout came from Sally Quinlin.

"Coming, Sal." Millard composed his Irish bartender's face, paused for an instant in front of Willie, then turned away and ambled toward the men. "Me and Digger was having a talk."

"Don't waste time on him," Quinlin said. He leaned far back on the stool and looked down at Willie. "He'll be gone in the blink of an eye. Vanished. Busting rocks at Vandallia or someplace." Quinlin squared his shoulders toward Willie and the badge sparkled.

"Why don't we just pair off and get it done with?" Willie said.

"You know, it ain't fair," Herbert Watson said. He sat beside Quinlin and threw his arms in the air.

"Shut up, Herb," Quinlin said. Then, to Willie, "If there was any justice you and that old man would have been put away years ago." Quinlin eased his legs
from under the bar and started to stand, but Watson reached up and held his shoulders.

"I'm telling you it ain't fair," Watson said again.

"I know that," Quinlin said patiently. "And I'm going to shut him up."

"Who?"

"Hardwick."

"I don't mean him," Herbert Watson said. "Who cares about him? I'm talking about my cousin from Pittsfield. He's a actor and he got on Gunsmoke once. I saw it."

"What's unfair about that?" Millard Dunson said.

"It ain't fair that you've got to be a success just to get a two-bit part on Gunsmoke and have Matt Dillon whip your ass...that's what ain't fair."

"You feel better?" Quinlin asked.

Herbert Watson nodded.

Sally Quinlin sat down and turned back to the TV.

"Please," he said over his shoulder, "please, Digger, give me a reason."

Willie looked at himself in the long mirror behind the bar. You don't look like anybody called "Digger", he thought. You were just a kid then and had no say in burying her.

"Look at me," Herbert Watson was saying. "I'm a meatcutter."
She may have been your grandmother, but she was his wife and it was him, Burl, that decided on just sticking her in the ground like that. And both parents dead in a car wreck, never known, they couldn't shoulder any of it, either.

Watson's voice kept getting louder and Willie turned to listen.

"Been a meatcutter all my life and spent most of that time trying to keep people from calling me a butcher."

"Settle down, Herb," Dunson said.

"I'll never be a success," Watson said.

Now, Burl stays out on the farm like he always did and everything for you has been wadded up into a nickname, Digger, and even if somebody uses it only out of habit, you still remember how the spade bit your hands in the cold. With only a couple of thousand people in Exeter, it wasn't easy to keep a secret. Especially that one.

"Sometimes my wife even calls me a butcher," Watson said. "I can't sleep nights."

Willie swallowed the last of his beer. As he was getting ready to leave, he turned and saw the door open and a man slip inside. Willie could tell from the mushroom shape that it was Bucket Hawkins, though his features were invisible in the darkness at the far side.
of the room. Willie shook his head. With Bucket, it could turn into a long night.

"Glad I caught you," Bucket said. "I was afraid I'd have to stand up to Millard alone."

"Lots of company," Willie said, waving his hand at the men.

Millard padded toward them, carrying two fresh beers.

"Millard the Miracle," Bucket said. "My life is complete with you. Anymore, I feel just like one of the boys."

"Thanks," Millard said. "And you restore my faith."

Bucket raised his glass to Willie. "May the bird of paradise fly up your nose."


"Was it that long ago? Eleven years. I'm old, I'm old. Someday I'll come up with a line you can't place." Bucket scratched his nose. "'Fools rush in where wise men fear to tread.'"

"Down with all wise men," Willie said, hoisting his glass. "And I think you blew the line. But it's no better than wise men deserve."

"Shame on you," Bucket said. "I've been trying to grow this moustache so I'll look like a wise man." He traced his finger along the smooth, chestnut line
under his nose.

"It won't work," Willie told him. "By the time that thing gets big enough to see at all, your cheeks will be so fat they'll cover it up."

"What the hell. Wise men all have fat cheeks, too. Look at all those old Chinese guys. They're the wisest men in the world and they all got fat, pink cheeks." Bucket pulled at the thin lip hairs. "And skinny moustaches, too. Long and skinny. Length before strength. That's right. You can always trust those Chinese old-timers."

"And the hell with Chinese old-timers, too," Willie said.

Bucket shook his head and put his hand on Willie's shoulder. "My friend, you have no faith in history. Them Chinese have been around for thousands of years, so they must have an in on something. Personally, I think it's moustaches." He shrugged and sipped beer, then wiped his mouth on the cuff of his shirt. "Now look at Millard down there. Don't he look Chinese?"

"You really are dumb," Willie said. "Are you doing this to me on purpose?"

"No, no. He thinks like a Chinaman. How else could he keep the peace in here? One Saturday night in this joint has got to equal at least a hundred years of Chinese History." Bucket stroked his chin thought-
fully. "That makes Millard at least sixty-five thousand years old—in relative historical terms."

Briefly, the streetlight again flashed into the tavern as the door opened for another customer. Willie didn't bother to look around. Bucket was rolling now and he'd have to work hard just to keep up.

"What about the Indians?" Willie said. "The gurus? Don't you think they're pretty smart?"

"Smart, maybe," Bucket said, "but never wise. Look at how scrawny and scraggly they are. Believe me, a Wise Man knows how to get a good meal."

"You're full of crap."

"The first true sign of wisdom," Bucket said soberly. "Who's the young lady?" He pointed into the mirror, then abruptly stood and walked to the newly occupied table.

Willie slid off the stool and followed. As he got closer, he could see that it was Kristen Goreman. She sat with her head lowered, face partially hidden behind a dark-colored scarf. Her foot jiggled nervously on the floor. She seemed impatient. Willie hadn't seen her here before. They always start out impatient, always expecting something to happen just because they're around. His head spun slightly as he approached the table, and Willie balanced himself against a chair. Bucket sat down next to her without saying a word.
"You are in the presence of a Wise Man," Willie said.

Bucket tipped his head, acknowledging the introduction. Kristen pulled off the scarf and ran the fingers of both hands along the back of her neck and up through her hair, flipping it out along the sides of her face. She couldn't have been over eighteen or nineteen, but you knew she was one of those who hadn't needed time to grow up. In a small town like Exeter, Kristen Goreman could walk around wearing nothing but her name and still have more self-assurance than most people could muster in a new suit of clothes. She motioned for Willie to sit.

"Which one of you is going to say it?" Kristen asked, looking from side to side at both men.

"Say what, my dear?" Bucket said.

"I don't know. Something about nice girls and shifty places like this."

Bucket picked up her hand from the table and said, "But that assumes you're a nice girl. As a Wise Man, I would never jump to a conclusion like that."

"Bucket thinks he's on the trail of the Chinese secret to long life," Willie said. "You and I know he's a fool. But it makes him feel better to call his bullshit wisdom."

Kristen pulled her hand away and looked at Willie,
her eyes coming closer together, focusing on him. There was gunfire and shouting from behind the bar. Matt Dillon's voice cut through the jumble of noise and Willie turned away from Kristen to watch. Sally Quinlin was shouting encouragement and pounding his fist on the bar. Millard was placid, his great red girth floating steadily before him as he breathed.

"This place is a drag," Kristen said.

"Sure it is," Bucket said. "That's why we come here. You see, there is a fine principle of logic involved. First, we know that the Exeter Hotel bar is boring Monday through Thursday nights. But, since we know it is boring, that means that we must not be boring people, because boring people cannot possibly know that they are boring." Bucket leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands confidently behind his head.

"I've heard stories about him," Kristen said to Willie.

"He has the weight of Chinese History on his side," Willie said. "That's why he's trying to grow that stupid moustache."

"I see," Kristen said. "I see everything but the moustache."

"Now you've hurt my feelings," Bucket said. "Some­day you'll be sorry for that. You'll be proud to tell your grandchildren you knew the legendary Bucket Hawk-

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"He's just trying to pick you up," Willie said. He leaned closer, drawn by the damp heat Kristen still carried from the cloudy September night.

"Don't worry about it, Willie," Bucket said. "A Wise Man never gets a woman."

"What's he raving about now?" Kristen said.

"You see, she's already hung up on you."

"What's he talking about?"

"Sweetheart," Bucket said, pulling at her sleeve, "it's another piece of simple logic. A woman can spot a Wise Man a mile off. And, because she knows he's a Wise Man, she knows for certain what he's after." He stroked her arm.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Kristen said, reaching for her scarf.

"You don't have to get hostile about it," Bucket said. "A young girl doesn't come wandering in here alone off the street without a pretty good idea of what she's getting into."

Willie watched Kristen knot the scarf under her chin. She seemed offended, but there was something about the sureness of her hands that said otherwise. Her fingers worked deliberately, as though they had made the same motion in the same circumstances many times. He knew the Exeter gossip well enough to be
fairly certain she was soaring in new territory, but
the steadiness was there, just the same.

"Only a fool can get a woman," Bucket said. "A
fool doesn't let on what he's after, since he's too
stupid to know. The woman thinks it was all her idea
and it makes her feel better, like she wasn't tricked,
or she's doing some poor dummy a favor. Fools are
lucky people. I've had to learn to be satisfied with
being a Wise Man."

Kristen was standing now, holding her arms tightly
under her breasts. "Will you take me home?" she said
to Willie.

Without answering, Willie stood. Her voice
sounded as though she didn't need an answer. Or want
one, either.

Bucket followed them out into the street. "I
guess I'll go home and watch my moustache grow," he
said.

"Why don't you?" Kristen said. It was almost ten
o'clock and the street was quiet and dark under the
clouds. Her voice echoed off the brick walls and was
absorbed by the low trees and humidity.

"Ease up some, Bucket," Willie said. He watched
the slow smile spread across Bucket's pudgy face.

"Yeah," Bucket said. "I guess I'll go home alone.
Again. You know, though, you prove my point on the
great 'Fools and Women' case." The smile turned into a kind of sweet glaze. "Have a nice drive."

Willie had taken a step toward him when the tavern door opened and Sally Quinlin fell through it.

"By God," Quinlin said, "we got 'em tonight."

Quinlin hitched up his pants and rocked on his heels. "Me and old Dillon showed them sonsofbitches this week. There's no stopping us." He leaned against the door jamb and picked at his teeth with the corner of a match book. "It ain't easy being Chief of Police and the whole force all by yourself."

"You should take some of Bucket Hawkin's Wise Man lessons," Kristen said. She was standing behind Quinlin and when he turned to her, Kristen put her hand over her mouth.

"Your daddy know you're here?" Quinlin said.

Kristen shrugged and her arm dropped to her side.

"These bums'll get you in big trouble." Quinlin pointed his thumb at Willie and Bucket Hawkins.

Willie scraped the cement with his heel. Things had turned sour with Bucket and now Quinlin was getting in the way. And what made it worse was that he knew Quinlin was right. You hate to admit that about Sally Quinlin, but Samuel Goreman's daughter is more trouble than you need. A car moved up the street behind Kristen, outlining the shadow of graceful legs through her
cotton skirt.

"Sally," Bucket said, "I think you should get Hardwick here off the streets. He's a menace."

Quinlin stuck the matchbook in his shirt pocket and sucked at a tooth. He pushed himself off the side of the building and started pacing back and forth on the sidewalk between Willie and Kristen.

Bucket Hawkins folded his arms and said, "Matt Dillon would run the likes of Hardwick out of town and blow his brains out if he didn't move fast enough."

"What are you talking about?" Willie said. "I live here."

"Now, Sally, you know that's right," Bucket said. "He's just sore because he made a fool out of himself," Willie said. "Why don't you beat it, Sally? You're wasting your time."

"She's out of your class, Digger," Bucket said.

Willie's teeth were chattering and as soon as he saw the slick smile return to Bucket's face, he grabbed his shirt and pushed him into a parked car. Out of the corner of his eye, Willie saw Quinlin tottering on the sidewalk, pistol in hand. Jesus, he thought, Oh Jesus!

"Hold it right there!" Quinlin shouted.

Willie and Bucket stopped and stood very still, looking at Quinlin.
"I said hold it right there!" Quinlin screamed again.

"We're holding, we're holding for Christ's sake," Bucket said. "Put the damned gun away."

Now, Quinlin was having real trouble with his legs. His baggy blue pants jiggled, as though full of small, quick animals. "Hold it right there!" Sally heaved the pistol into the air and fired a shot.

Willie heard a sharp tick through the blast and the severed ends of a thick telephone cable dropped into the street.

"My God, he's killed the phone company," Bucket said.

Quinlin was maneuvering his gun hand again, when his head snapped forward and he slumped to the sidewalk. Kristen held a long board in both hands. "Poor Sally," she said.

By the time Kristen had thrown the board back into the alley, the men were all out of the tavern. They stood in a tight huddle around Sally Quinlin and muttered about the shot and the phone line and the general injustice of living in a world full of people who made loud noises in the middle of the night.

"I was on the phone to my wife," Dave Parker said.

"You don't like her anyway," Millard Dunson said.

He turned to Willie. "What happened here?"
After Willie had gone over the story, Millard Dunson directed the men as they carried Sally Quinlin back inside the tavern.

"You'd better get home," Millard said from the door. "For years and years Sally Quinlin has watched Gunsmoke on my television, then gone out and made his rounds. Most people know enough to stay out of his way."

"He was the one got in our way," Willie said.

"Doesn't matter. You know what it'll be like when he wakes up."

Bucket Hawkins was already in his car and backing away from the curb.

"Shouldn't we wait and talk to the police?" Kristen asked.

"Good Lord," Millard said, "I'd think you'd done enough of that already. Sally's the one in trouble with the law. You've got trouble with your daddy. Both of you." Millard stepped back and the door swung shut.

"Looks like we're partners," Kristen said.

Willie turned and walked toward the old Pontiac and Kristen kept pace with him. When he got to the car, Willie climbed up and sat down on the hood and laughed. He leaned his back against the windshield and Kristen was beside him, laughing too. He put his arm under her shoulders and pulled her closer, feeling
the scarf slide off and her hair clean and soft against
his cheek. Above them, the trees jumped and their
branches began to creak as the thick wind ripped around
the edges of the buildings. Then, it started to rain
and they got in the car.
"General Pemberton is having a bitter time of it tonight," Kristen said, pointing at the statue in the center of the public square.

"I'll never understand," Willie said, "how the man who lost Vicksburg ended up a statue in Illinois."
The car slowed and he looked out at the great bronze man who stood atop the block of gray marble and brandished a sword at the rain. "He probably surrendered on a night like this," Willie said.

Kristen moved closer to him. "I feel cold," she said. "I know it's not cold, but I feel cold."

"It's the rain."

"I guess so. It sounds cold so I feel cold."

"This old car will get us through," he said.

"I've got faith in this car. She's driven me home on worse nights than this." He squinted along the hood at the chrome Indian. "I'm telling you, this car's got instinct," Willie said. "Instinct."

"I walked to the hotel," Kristen said. "Didn't think it would rain."

"Maybe you just didn't figure on walking home. Those things happen." He gave her a sidelong glance, then looked back at the Indian.
"Do you know where I live?" Kristen said.

Willie nodded. "How do you figure I could live here all my life and not know a thing like that?" he said.

"Do you think Sally has come to yet?"

"Do horses have wings?"

"Only if they're flying horses," she said. "And stop being nasty."

"No, I don't think Sally has come to yet," Willie said. "You really put one on him." He laughed and rested his arm in her lap. "I'm not like Bucket Hawkins. I counted you for a nice girl."

"Thank you."

"What I can't understand is how you got so handy with a two-by-four. You swung that thing like a sailor."

"Yo-ho-ho," she said.

At the northeast corner of the square, Willie drove straight down Hastings, then turned right on Highway 110. All the lights were out at Estel Cowper's Texaco station, except for the Bardahl sign Estel kept on for thieves, and the street seemed ordinary. Everybody by-passed Exeter on the new Federal highway, but 110 was still different because it could take you out of town. Poor Estel's nearly dead from lost business, always hunched over a flat tire or a busted car when
you stop in, crying about the lousy Feds and the lousy Goddamned freeway and nobody buys gas and him with three lousy kids to raise up on change from cigarettes and Pepsi Cola. After two blocks, they passed a squat tarpaper building. Smoke, beaten down by rain, hung about the roof and walls like a dark fist.

"Emory's working tonight," Willie said. The two small windows were filled with an orange glow and steam leaked through one of the broken sections of glass. Emory Hardwick was the last living blacksmith in Exeter, Illinois.

"When I was little," Kristen said, "my friends and I would sneak over here and peek through the windows. We pretended there was a monster inside. Probably because of all the fire and sparks we saw."

"He's my uncle," Willie said.

"Oh...I'm sorry. For calling him a monster, I mean."

"It's okay," Willie said. "You could be right."

"You can't mean that. Not about family." She turned her head, keeping her eyes fastened on the blacksmith shop as he drove past. "Let's stop," Kristen said. "I want to stop and go inside."

"See the monster first hand?"

"Like looking under the bridge for trolls," Kristen said. She faced Willie and her smooth forehead
seemed to glow, as if her skin had absorbed the orange heat of the forge simply by turning toward it on a dismal night.

"No."

"Why not? It's a perfectly natural thing to do. He's your uncle. Why shouldn't you stop in to say hello on your way home?"

"No." What else was there to say? It seemed impossible that she could not know about his grandfather and his brother Emory. Everybody in town knew they hadn't spoken for nearly fifty years. Her family had been involved, maybe even partly responsible. Ed Garvey was hanged and buried all these years now and you still might sit in Fletcher's or the Hotel and old men would bend their faces low over coffee or drinks and look at each other through their brows and shake their heads, the way men do when bad things come up out of nowhere, come up sudden, like when an ice cube thaws and a pocket of frozen air squeezes out into bourbon and water and the sound surprises you because it's unexpected. Rotten dreams don't need an invitation and Kristen had to know that any contact he might have with Emory couldn't be as easy as just walking in to pay your respects on the way home.

"Listen," she said, "I sort of bailed you out back at the Hotel. Don't you think you owe me one?"
"If you're going to play it like that, then the hell with you," Willie said. He pulled the car to the curb in front of the abandoned grade school. "I never asked for a damned thing from you." Rain fell like buckshot on the car.

"So what? If I hadn't done it, they might have carried you off, or worse."

And what do you say to that? You try to avoid debts, but sometimes they're made for you. Willie studied the girl's face and he knew from the way her thinly parted lips stretched across her teeth that she would be one who would always collect.

"I want to go back," she said, smiling now, erasing that one quick, poisonous look.

Willie put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. He circled around behind the school playground that was now filled with small shiny houses, and pulled into the dirt lot behind Emory Hardwick's shop.

Kristen was first out of the car and her foot slipped as soon as it touched the ground. She fell back through the door and Willie reached over and caught her head.

"Watch out," he said. "You've got to be careful. It's the rain and all the old oil that's been leaked out around here." He got out and stepped quickly on the balls of his feet toward the door. "Gets like
glass whenever there's water on it."

There was a close path through the towering heaps of junk. All around them the jagged parts of discarded machinery jutted up into the rain. Running to catch Willie, Kristen barked her shin on an old wagon axle which had long ago been placed carefully over two oil drums and since mounded over on one end with worn out pumps and engine blocks and indecipherable scraps of rusted sheet steel. The path was thick with chain links that were trampled into the rich, oily dirt, as though the survivors of a million ruined farms, ten million dried out wells and countless trips to and from town on crummy roads, the casualties of lives nobody could remember, sat in the rain and bled small square chain links onto the path, the one remaining sliver of clear real estate. The rain collected in small pools around the chain links and as they approached the open door, Willie could see Emory's forge burning in those cool puddles of rain.

Inside, Willie looked through the smoke and steam and saw his uncle standing at the forge, his back to the door. Emory held a large hammer poised above his head, then smashed it down on a piece of hot metal.

Willie wiped the rain from his face. "What are you working on tonight, old man?" he said.
"Steel," Emory said, without turning. "Nothing but steel. Good for the constitution."

The shop was even more crowded than the ground outside, with scrap reaching from floor to ceiling, so that if the tarpaper walls someday disappeared, it was unlikely that anybody inside would ever mark their passing. There was less rust inside, though, and you had to wonder what kind of strange system Emory had that determined what should be kept out of the weather and what could be consigned to the elements.

"Do you remember me?" Kristen said. "I'm the little girl who used to throw rocks through the window and splash you with water from that big tank."

"Ah, missy, missy," Emory sighed, still close at his work. "You could be anybody in a skirt if that's all you got to remember you."

"I sometimes wore jeans."

"What a shame," Emory said, turning now to study her from under the turned up bill of his machinist's cap. "I'm a fair great blacksmith," he said to Willie, laughing, "but there's some things I can't fix, like pretty girls what wears pants. There's nothing I know for a thing like that."

Emory dropped his hammer onto the dirt floor and tossed his thick, high-cuffed leather gloves onto the small greasy cot stashed behind a partition constructed
of stacked tire rims.

"Kristen wanted to know what the inside of a real, live blacksmith shop was like," Willie said.

"But it's home, just home," Emory said. "How do you like it?"

"It's very cozy," Kristen said, shifting her eyes from wall to wall. "Very cozy."

"I haven't done the cleaning yet today," Emory said sadly. The silver flecks in his heavy black pants and shirt sparkled in the firelight. "If I'd of known there was guests in tonight's prophecy, then I'd of straightened up. What's your name, dear?"

"Kristen Goreman."

"Goreman, ah, Goreman," Emory said, rubbing his hands on a faded red shop towel.

"She belongs to Samuel Goreman," Willie told him. "His daughter."

"I see, I see," Emory said. "Well, you're really out and about tonight, aren't you, missy?"

"You should see how she handles a club," Willie said. "If she's Samuel Goreman's daughter, then there's no surprise in that one."

"You must get lonesome," Kristen said, "all shut up in here by yourself."

Emory laughed again and wiped the shop towel under his nose. "Used to be lots of people come by," he said.
"Never got lonesome then. Just the other way around. Course, later, when I started that business with the gold, I discouraged them and it soon stopped."

"Gold," Kristen said.

Emory nodded. "Thirty, forty years ago, I got started trying to extract gold from scrap metal. That's how come there to be so much junk around here. I collected up all the stuff I could and now I got more junk than I can mine. Never found a lick of gold yet, though. Not a lick."

Willie walked to the forge and poked at the coals. "You remember," he said, "that time I sneaked down here out of school and we tried to melt down all those old combine parts and skim off any shiny stuff that came to the top?"

"Sure, sure. Looking for gold. That's all it was. I never told you. You got to watch out people finding things out about you. What'd everybody think if they knew I was running a gold mine in this place? I'd be in big trouble."

"People might think you were a little...odd," Kristen said.

"Odd, hell. Why, they'd be all over me. Clean me out overnight. You know how people is when things is tangled up with gold. Now, you two keep this quiet, hear?" Emory looked uneasily from Kristen to Willie.
"Hear?"

"She won't talk," Willie said. "I'll see to it."

Willie stood beside the forge and scratched little designs in the caked floor with a poker. You could see that Emory was a man of business and that business didn't include young girls that came around late at night just to satisfy a whim. The light started to fade and Emory looked around at the fire and began worrying the red towel in his hands. When Willie was a boy, he had seen mysterious things take shape at the hands of Emory Hardwick, secret things that were drawn from the fire and wrought from steel, then turning slowly orange amid the sparks and the piercing ring of Emory's tools, then a dull silver-gray, the same color as the steam given off when you plunge them into cool water. He wanted to put his fingers on the old man's arm and ask him to make him something, make him a toy shovel or a knife and hold it always in the big pincers just above the fire, never hot enough to melt back into dumb, stupid metal, always with that faint orange glow that made the thing special, frozen at the very edge of being finished and new. Willie discovered Kristen's arm around his waist, shaking him.

"You okay?" Emory said.

"Sure, fine."

"You looked a little funny there for a minute,"
"I was just thinking how close I come to getting shot tonight," Willie said, lowering his head and flexing his back. "It was pretty close, wasn't it?" he said to Kristen.

"We'd better go," she said.

"Curiosity satisfied?" Emory said.

Kristen smiled and touched the old man's shirt.

"Curiosity satisfied," she said. "I'm sorry we bothered you."

"What's the bother?" Emory said. "Pretty girl's never a bother." He stuck the towel into his hip pocket and guided them to the door. A cold draft whipped Kristen's skirt and the rain was blown level with the junk outside. Wind swirled in the doorway and they were touched for a moment by a fine mist. "Goodby," Emory said.

Inside the car, Willie switched on the ignition and ground the engine, but nothing happened. The cylinders cranked and whined and refused to catch. "Come on, Chief," Willie said, first looking ahead at the chrome Indian, then tapping his forehead on the steering wheel. "Come on, I don't need trouble from you."

"Some car," Kristen said.

Willie stopped, looked at her for an instant, and
tried the ignition again. Nothing.

"I think your car has finally come home to rest," Kristen said, waving her arms at the junkyard.

"The problem is I want to go home and rest," Willie said.

"Just leave it. You can walk me home and I'll get a car and drive you."

"I'm afraid if I leave it here, Emory'll have it stripped down for gold by morning," Willie said.

"No," she said. "Anybody can see there's no gold in this car." Kristen got out and started walking.

Together, they left Emory's place and struck out through the rain for Kristen's house. "I feel like a commando," Willie said. He looked back at the shop and saw Emory standing at the window, laughing, his arms braced on the sill above his head, as though he might be concealing a hammer, a huge dull sledge that had to be lifted with both hands, and in a flash Emory's shoulders and back would double over and hammer the rain, seal off the way back to the car and the shop, the warm, dry fire.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Kristen asked, struggling against the wind.

"We just talked to one," Willie said.

"I think there are ghosts all around us," Kristen said. "See them? There, in those bushes. It's a big
ghost, in a black coat. He's smoking a cigarette in the rain and not getting wet. You see him?"

"Walk faster."

"I like the rain. I'm not cold anymore."

"Faster."

"There's another one. There, on the Janson's porch swing. This time it's a woman. She's wearing a long white dress and holding one of those big fans. Look! It's made out of pink ostrich feathers and now she's hiding her face behind it."

Soon, they were running, their feet clattering on the wet cement. The late summer trees bent low under the storm and when the rain eased up, there was only the sound of water dripping from leaf to leaf. When they reached Kristen's house, Willie would stand with her on the step. Maybe he would kiss her, or maybe just shake his head, say goodnight and leave. He didn't want her to drive him home. She'd given him enough already. A ride home was a little thing, compared with the rest, but you have to stop sooner or later. The wind was cold now, following after the rain, and Willie's clothes clung to him like slabs of mud.

"You never saw the ghosts, did you?" Kristen asked.

"Yes. I saw them."
"I wonder who they were."

"It doesn't matter. Once you're dead, it doesn't matter who you were. You can sit on a porch or smoke a dry cigarette in the rain and it doesn't make any difference at all who you were."
CHAPTER III
BURLE HARDWICK'S REVENGE

It took a long time to walk six miles, and even though the rain had stopped, the air hung about Willie's shoulders in a cold, sticky film. There were occasional gusts of wind that shredded the clouds, exposing the countryside to moonlight. Everything smelled cold and new, like fresh meat.

_You just as well laugh as cry_, Emory used to say, and that seemed a reasonable way to look at things. Willie hadn't walked home since school, one day after Miss Brunei told him about French influence in this part of Illinois, sitting saucily on the edge of her desk, speaking in that saucy little voice about Marquette, LaSalle, Joliet, seventeenth century explorers.

"I heard of Joliet," Skid Johnson said that day. "That's where the state pen's at." Everybody laughed and Miss Brunei placed her right hand on the desk, locked the elbow and leaned on it. Willie's eyes traced the fine blue veins up toward her shoulder, and when she reached across with the other hand and gently touched herself on the inside of her arm, Willie rubbed a thumb over his own calloused fingers and tried to imagine skin that soft, skin that ready to move.

"You can also see the French influence in one of
the place names around Exeter," Miss Brunel said. "It's the creek. Mauvaisterre Creek." She pronounced it Movay-tare, saying the r real funny, like something stuck in the back of her throat.

"I told her star," Willie said now, Movis-star, sounding out the name like he'd always heard it spoken. He smelled of dirt and sweat that afternoon in Miss Brunel's class, recognized his own smell against the sweet air filtering through the tulip tree alongside the window.

"When translated," Miss Brunel said, "Mauvaisterre means bad earth, or sick ground. I can't imagine why, though. Everything around here is so lush, even with the drought all summer. I'm really taken by your beautiful farms and woods and everything. Maybe the English knew something when they corrupted the word into star."

Saucy St. Louis woman, she didn't know anything. Willie walked faster, drawing near the Crawford place. The moonlight was steady now and ahead he could see where the country dropped off and began to roll down toward the creek. White heavy mist gathered in the hollows and you couldn't know from here how rough the land was. The mist gleamed like a white carpet and it looked as though the level ground went on forever and you could walk all night and never find that muddy
ditch called Mauvaisterre. You might hear the water spill over an occasional stone, but it would be far below you as you stepped easily atop the clean mist.

Walking past the dark Crawford house, Willie again heard Darrall's crutches complain as he climbed to his feet that afternoon with Miss Brunel. Willie was at her desk. "I didn't mean to be smart," he said.

"It doesn't matter what your intentions were," voice the only cool thing in the room.

"I want to learn, but there's things I know about already, like that creek. Things I've got to get out."

"Not at my expense."

"Come on, Willie," Darrall said from the door. "You can maybe walk it, but I can't." He thumped the rubber tip of a crutch on the floor. "Let's go. We'll miss the bus."

"You're from the city," Willie said. And here he was, all grown up now and still talking to a saucy St. Louis woman on a dark road. The Crawford house seemed to groan at the moon as he went by. Old Lady Crawford stood one morning years ago on the porch, waving Darrall's two wooden crutches at him, screaming, You git, Digger Hardwick, git, Darrall's gone for good now and you never come back, never if your life depended on it set foot on this property, we'll bury our own. We don't need you. And through the rain-streaked sky,
Willie could still see the big white Buick that Marlene, Darrall's mother, had driven down from Chicago. The Buick was blotched with dust and sat under a tree, looking rich and sad, out of place on that good, level farm.

Well, Miss Brunei had run off with a feed salesman and Marlene had gone back to Chicago and Willie had his own saucy woman now. God knows what you do with a woman like that, but Kristen wasn't the kind you could ignore. The mist was closer now and the road began to drop off slightly. He should have taken the ride she offered, suddenly finding himself hip-deep in mist, each step submerging him more into the white darkness. He could barely make out the savage oaks along the road, and not at all the thickets. Nothing sounded alive, no small animals darted through the brush, and soon the iron bones of Pullings Bridge surprised him out of the bright fog. His steps boomed on the thick, warped planks. Burl waited on the other side, waited alone in the old house, probably dreaming up some new scheme to give Willie another pain in the butt. Not that he needed anything new for that. Willie stopped, and in the stillness, he heard the creek.

Willie couldn't count the times he'd seen the water under this bridge. He sat and dangled his feet over the edge of the planks and looked down. A giant,
white pit opened below him and the water could have been a few inches or miles away. Nobody could find you in weather like this. Bucket Hawkins couldn't find you and drive you crazy. The ghost of Darrall Crawford couldn't find you. Sally Quinlin couldn't put you in jail or pull a gun on you. And Burl couldn't eat away at you with any more of those stories. You could rest here for centuries and get rock solid drunk on the weather and the sound of water unseen, unviolated as it slipped past under the white sheet of fog.

Gone.

The white sheet tipped it. That was one of the old man's stories, and as Willie sat on the bridge, it was as though the creek recited it back to him.

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It was terrible dry ten years ago and Willie had been walking in the dust along the road and his stomach still churned from the trouble with Miss Brunei. Willie rounded the last curve and sat down at the end of the row of spirea bushes and put his shoes and socks back on. He watched Burl moving in and out of the barn. He watched the house, two stories of clapboard, long front room on the ground floor made of logs, old, veneered over, hill steepening toward the barn. The old man worked in and out of the barn that pitched awkwardly
toward the Mauvaisterre and, depending on how you looked at it, the ridge dropped more under the weight of the barn, or the barn conformed to the shape of the land. The old man was latching up the long sliding door on the barn and that was good. Willie didn't like chores, though he had learned to bear them, learned that you put your mind to something else, pretend it's a famous cowboy stumbling against the bulk of hay bales, and you're not stumbling at all, you're swaggering. You make the hogs an invading army and pick them off one by one with grenades, ears of corn. The old man couldn't know the rules of pretend. A woman might understand how the rules worked, but there hadn't been a woman at the house for a long time now. Sometimes you worry about no woman and how things got that way. And you worry that fourteen is too old for games, any­how.

The poppies were matted on the ground this time of year and Willie could see the stones, some an off-white, some nearly brown, splashed across the hill. The stones weren't organized in any particular way. It was as though the graveyard started by accident, by surprise, like the Hardwicks had carried their dead up the hill until they got tired, set the coffin down and dug a hole on the spot. That was how he and Burl buried Sarah, his grandmother. Almost, anyway. He
couldn't remember for certain. Things like that, you have to work back to in layers and sometimes it took a long time and sometimes it didn't work out at all. Willie got up and trotted down to meet the old man.

"Sorry I'm late," Willie said.

"No you're not. No sense adding a lie to it."

Burl didn't look at him. A frog croaked from the mud along the creek and Burl pulled off his yellow cotton gloves and stuck them inside his shirt. He rolled down his sleeves over white, stringy arms and walked away, swinging red boney hands loosely at the ends of his plaid shirt, his pants cuffs dragging the ground.

"Missed the bus," Willie said.

"You're all the help I got," Burl said. "If you can't hold up to that, it's okay by me."

Willie shook his head. That's the way he works you. Makes like he doesn't care a damn. Sneaks up on you like that.

Burl stopped halfway to the house and sat on the well-top. He pulled off his cap and worked the pump handle a long time until he got water. Then, he stuck his white, bald head under the spigot and let the water spill over him. And, as he pumped with one hand, he rubbed the other against his face, blowing loudly to keep the water out of his nose. The old, loose skin bunched up at the leading edge of his hand. Finally,
he stopped and sat up and looked at the boy. Water trickled from his stubbled chin in a lean, gray thread and splattered on his shirt front.

"They was this fella once," Burl said. "This was way back after the first World War, back when Emory was still to home." Burl slumped back against the cast iron pump. That's always the answer. You tell a story. If this man, this old man with bad teeth that never smile, old fool too closed off from everybody even to be labeled criminal, when the crime had been not alone against his dead wife, but against a boy who still had to be around other people, if this old man had been Noah, the whole world would have sunk then and there because he took time out to tell the animals a story about another rain storm he'd seen years earlier. Emory, he'd said. The name sounded hollow and dry rolling off his grandfather's tongue.

"They was this fella," Burl Hardwick said. He cocked his head, as though listening for something far off. "Dave Kinison hired him off the road to work around the place."

Willie crouched in the dust. He could run away and hide out in the brush until after dark, when the old man would maybe be too tired or have forgotten. He could draw figures with his fingers in the yellow dust, make up a game in his head. He could do anything.
Willie sat in the dust and watched the old man's mouth move. Emory. That was the barb on the hook.

(Note: Begin italics here.)

Dave Kinison's family'd been around here almost as long as ours and they lived out on the flat about halfway between Old Lady Crawford's and town. Dave had a sister that married and moved away and him and the wife, always seemed a cold woman, but she was a few years older than me and I never knew her more than to wave when I went by. The little girl was named Beatrice, about fourteen or fifteen, and not at all like her mother.

This fella was named Ed Garvey and nobody thought much about it when Kinison hired him on. Garvey was around town off and on for a couple of years and never got much except shoveling coal at the railway yards and sweeping out stores for whiskey money. It was Prohibition then, but Garvey always managed to turn a drink, as most of us did.

Dave Kinison finally took him on at wheat cutting time and I guess Garvey thought he'd at least get fed good, even if the work was harder than he was used to at the yards and everybody knew Kinison'd never allow him to lay up drunk on whiskey, which Garvey was prone to do. Seemed he had it pretty good as it was, so the town never understood why he'd want to move out to
Kinison's, even for meals. She couldn't of been that good at the stove, and like I said, there wasn't much else in her.

This happened in 1920 and those had been in France were of course home, but everybody was still kind of edgy having them around. I mean, we were glad they was back, and they were glad, too, but there was something different about them even then, like they'd been made a different shape and wouldn't quite fit back into the way the rest of us was. And, of course, some didn't come back, which made for a strain with their folks. We all understood—but what can you do?—so we kept up with being glad the war was over. And, I suppose most of us was.

Anyhow, Dave Kinison had this Garvey working for him that summer and one Friday I was down to the courthouse about the taxes or something and Kinison comes in dragging Garvey by his shirt collar and carrying two jars of bootleg whiskey under his arm. Kinison hauls his load into the Sheriff's Office and says, I've caught this man drinking in my barn and I want him in jail.

Henry Evans was Sheriff during that time and he says, Well, Dave, I'll do that, but it'd help if we knew where the whiskey come from.

Kinison says he don't know and don't care, all he wants is Ed Garvey behind bars and out of his hair.
That's what Henry Evans does and Kinison takes off for home like there was a wild animal after him.

This was in July and the jail then was a cell in the Sheriff's Office in the basement of the courthouse, like it is now still. Henry Evans locks old Garvey up and says, Well, looks like there'll have to be a trial and I'm sorry for it. I still take a drink myself just like most men, except I suppose Dave Kinison. Then, he locks them two jars of whiskey up in the safe for evidence.

What we ought to do, I says, is drink that whiskey and to hell with Dave Kinison.

Henry Evans laughs and says, That's right, and then Garvey laughs too and says, You know, that man found me in a whorehouse up in Peoria three years ago and told me he'd pay me a thousand dollars to go in the army for him.

All of a sudden me and Henry Evans wasn't laughing anymore and Garvey just hung there from the inside of the bars, shaking his head like he can't either believe what he's just told us, then laughing like a man who's just fired his last bullet at a wolf on a dark night. I told him, Garvey says, that's a lot of money, but he don't care, he tells me, because he's got a farm he's getting rich off of from the war and a little girl and he can't afford to take off for no Goddamned Army and
would I go for a thousand dollars.

I asks him if he went.

Sure I went, Garvey says, spent part of the money for another turn that very same night. Garvey laughs again, then says, You know, I still would like to get used to brocade walls and gentle ladies. But that Cora Kinison's a hard woman and I run out of money before I ever got to France. That's how come me to be here in Exeter. He winks, then says, You know, Kinison don't like having me around a little bit. Garvey scratches his head and goes and sits on the bunk.

Well, Garvey cools his heels in jail that weekend and when Henry Evans opens the safe on Monday morning, there's nothing left of the evidence but pieces of broken glass. I figure the whiskey was a little green and it got so hot in the safe it blew up before Ed Garvey or me or Henry Evans got a chance to try and kill ourselves with it. There was nothing left but to turn Garvey out and that's what Henry Evans did.

Garvey went back to work for Kinison and it weren't a week before Kinison's little girl was found violated and drowned in a stock tank. Garvey was the one reported little Beatrice and he was in big trouble from the start.

Me and Emory went to town as soon as we heard and there was a big crowd of men at the jail. Kinison and
his wife were staying over at the Hotel, people said because they were too broke up to handle going back to their farm for a few days, and Henry Evans had plenty on his hands trying to keep everybody calm down to the jail. You could of lit a match just holding it up to the air.

James G. Goreman, who was a lawyer and Samuel Goreman's father, was there, dressed in a light tweed suit with a vest and a heavy gold watch chain and fob that shimmered and caught the light and the heat as he stood on the basement step of the courthouse and held up his arms at the crowd.

Men, James G. Goreman says, I know there has been a terrible outrage and we all want justice for that little girl who met with such a terrible end. Many of us here were told as children about popular justice at the hands of those who settled this town. Men, I know we want that kind of justice, but that was before the law. That time is past.

Goreman took off his hat and held it behind his back. Men, he says, we all live under the law and the law is a patient thing. The man inside this jail will get no less than his kind deserve if only we are patient with the law.

Now, Goreman and Kinison were pals and this kind of talk coming from Goreman took a strong hold of
people. If Goreman could wait out the law in the
course of justice for his friend's daughter, then I
guess most of the men at the jail felt they could too,
because they settled down. Some even went home. Me
and Emory stayed and waited to see what else might
happen. Goreman left, too, and when he walked by us
Emory stands up and tells him that was a good speech.

Thank you, James G. Goreman says.

Yes sir, Emory says, a real fine speech.

Thank you, Goreman says again, then, Please ex­
cuse me. I must go to the hotel and see how the Kini­
sons are bearing up. This has been a terrible tragedy
for them.

It surely has, Emory says and sits down again.

I was keeping track of time by the clock on top
of the courthouse and about seven that evening some of
the wives brought baskets of food down to their men
and the men shared it with those of us didn't have any.
We sat there on the grass and ate and smoked and talked
and now and again there'd be a car go by making a lot
of noise and some of the men would stand up and shout
something about what had happened, what was going on
there at the jail, or maybe calling out to ask if the
folks had heard any news of the Kinisons from the hotel.
When that happened, Henry Evan's face would show up
inside the jailhouse window, checking to make sure no-
thing was getting stirred up. I expect poor Henry was pretty shaky in them hours, with all of us outside and him in there with a man supposed to be a killer, a man me and Henry'd almost shared a drink with right there in the jail just a few days before all this.

Later on it got dusk and me and Emory was still sitting close-by the street, so I guess maybe we was the first ones saw it. At first I thought it was just something funny with the sun going down, before they turned out of the alley onto Prairie Street, I see this light flickering kind of funny along the side wall of the bank.

I stand up and so does Emory and then the cars, four of them, swing out of the alley and I see they're full of men and more men hanging on the fenders. They're all wearing sheets and hoods and that funny light's coming from torches.

We better clear out, I says to Emory.

No, he says and pulls a handkerchief out and mops away the sweat along the back of his neck. No. His voice has a kind of catch in it. We can't go now, he says and his feet sort of move around inside his tracks.

All four cars pulled over to the curb and the men climbed down. I'd heard talk they was working in the County and I should of been ready for them—but how can you? I remember there was a sticky breeze got up
at sundown and the sheets clung to the fronts of the men when they walked through the crowd up to the jail and the torchlight played across everybody's faces.

Pretty quick everybody got loud and one of the covered-up things threw a torch inside the jail and I could see Henry Evans trying to put out the fire. That was when they broke down the door. I heard shouting from inside and shortly they come out with Garvey and start off on foot down Prairie Street toward the park, moving right past me, jostling me around. But I stayed put. I was the last living man there at the jail, for it turned out Henry Evans had got killed, got his head smashed on the bars when they busted through the door and somebody kicked him in the ribs and threw him out of the way. I saw it all.

There was never no public evidence against Garvey that I heard of. I remember looking over at the hotel while all this was going on and I see a shadow standing in one of the windows. And I remember one of them Kluxers brushing past me on tweed legs and black shoes about as shiny as that gold watch, so shiny you could count the torches in them.

I stand there awhile and the noise is carried back heavy on the wind and the close air. Pretty soon it gets too quiet and I know they're done. I look down and there's Emory's sweat-stained handkerchief spread
out all white there on the grass. The shadow's gone from the window and a few days later Dave Kinison ups and shoots himself in the head. His wife moves off shortly after that and just leaves the farm for whoever wants it. But nobody does. Who would? You've seen it. Would you want that farm?

(Note: End italics here.)

* * *

Shortly after the lynching somebody burned down the Kinison house and all the outbuildings. Willie sat swinging his feet over the edge of the bridge and stared off into the fog. The only thing left of the Kinison place was a grove of maples that sat now in the middle of a field and weeds grew thick around the trees so that you had to walk out into them before you could see the caved-in brick walls of the basement. And if you explored that ruined pit you might find warped pieces of metal, like a fork or a spoon, other utensils, or a shard of broken glass, maybe brass hardware that had the woodwork burned off.

The Hardwick place was about three hundred yards on past the bridge. Willie could cover that distance in a short time and when he went inside, the old man would be waiting under a single lamp, still sitting there in his work clothes, older than when he'd told
the Ed Garvey story, harder, mouth pinched, expectant, his one remaining eye less patient these days. His fingers would be laced in rough ridges across his stomach, looking tough, scarred, like a field you've planted when the ground's too wet and you know the seed will rot, crop turn out bad, but still a crop. Burl would turn when he heard the door and this time the mouth would smile in a funny way as he asked, "Where you been?" and smile wider still when Willie is unable to answer.
"Hogs," he said. It was Friday night and Kristen waited outside the Exeter Ten-Strike Lanes and Willie stopped beside her and kicked the cinderblock walls. "Hogs. They're the smartest animals in the world and you think they're stupid. Hogs will dig out from under fences, demolish a barn, refuse to climb on a truck, eat each other's tails off and when you beat them halfway to death with the biggest club you can lay hands on, they'll run until they fall over and then sit there in the dirt looking at you while you pound on them till your arm drops and after that, hogs will get up and just walk on by. I don't like hogs one damned bit. You think they're stupid, but they do it on purpose because they know nothing much very good is going to come of them in the end. I had a bad day. How are you?"

"Only fair," she said.

"We had this sow once and she was old, burned out and so Burl decided he'd sell her, but there wouldn't be much money in it. A day or so before the truck was coming, I turned up a rattlesnake and Burl decided we'd give that sow to the snake. Sort of a courtesy."

"God," Kristen said. "That's terrible. I mean
"Right," he said. We drove sow to snake and that damned hog watched the snake for awhile and the snake worked its little fanny off. Bit the hog eleven times and the hog finally got tired of all that nonsense and picked the snake up and ate it. Kind of a snake snack."

"I can tell you don't like hogs," Kristen said.

"Not my best friends. No. Don't like snakes, either. Let's go bowling." He took her arm and they walked toward the door and the noise from the jukebox, thunder and crash of balls striking pins, Friday night sounds that get in your blood and make you jump, sounds of people having fun.

"Bad day for you too?" Willie said.

"You know how it is with us idle rich," Kristen said. She made primping gestures about her face and hair. "Brunch at ten, tea at four, dinner at eight."

"I hope you don't get gas from all that eating." Why does he say these things?

"We idle rich have a special medicine for that," Kristen said and walked on his foot.

Bowling alley smoke is different from other kinds of smoke. In a tavern, when the lights are dim and colored various shades of red and green and blue, the smoke is kind of melancholy and people carry on in secret behind it. Clandestine smoke. And party smoke
is about the same. There's always lots of smoke in the cramped lobby outside the gym during basketball games, but that smoke has a kind of nervous feel to it, the kind of tension given off by men who know their kids are edging into that special time when they can do anything, any damned thing in the world, and the men know now, see it in every cleanly made shot, every smooth jump, the men know it is their time to watch, to sit shoulder to shoulder in the bleachers and feel their muscles twitch in the old ways. Bowling alley smoke is pure, physical energy smoke. If there is money down on a particular frame, tension may be in the smoke, but that tension, unlike at basketball, is worked off with your next trip to the line. Even if your bones will shatter playing basketball, you can still bowl and be absolutely guaranteed that each and every person will make at least one good shot, one shot that says: Yeah. I've still got it.

Bucket Hawkins had picked up a girl named Loretta earlier at a roadhouse on the way to White Hall. Bucket Hawkins was, indeed, one of the real people. His mustache hadn't filled out any since Monday, but he was confident that wisdom was at hand, and kept badgering Loretta to sing Coal Miner's Daughter because, he said, it always made him cry.
"I don't want any gunplay tonight," Bucket said.

"No," Kristen said. "We shouldn't have any gunplay."

"Bowl," Willie said.

"People shouldn't play with guns," Loretta said.

"I'm serious," Bucket said. "No gunplay."

Sally Quinlin was fired the day after what was now known as the Hotel Incident and, as Bucket had predicted, there was a legend in progress, though not his own. Bucket had a comfortable belly, which he sucked in during his James Dean imitation and let sag when he stuck his fingers in a bowling ball, rolled his eyes and moaned far back in his throat.

"Okay, Loretta," Bucket said, smoothing his stubby fingers over the slick black ball. "Give me a strike tonight." The real Loretta giggled. "Just one for Bucket." He planted his feet properly on the floor.

"You squeeze just right...you get a strike. Catch it on the run, honeybuns." Bucket took four steps, cocked his right arm and launched the ball with a mighty sweep that landed him on the floor and the ball in the gutter.

"You have no finesse," Willie said. "Bowling is a game of finesse and you don't have one single little bit."

"Big shot," Bucket said, brushing off the back of
his jeans. He limped to the ball return, crouched and waited.

"Always," Willie said. He sipped beer and rubbed Kristen's thigh. It was a usual kind of night. The monotony of work, quick baths and long nights of short beers had turned into something tangible, like carrying the same dirty rag in your pocket, always shifting the same rag to clean pants, waiting for the same Bucket Hawkins to concoct some new insult.

Emory had fixed the car just fine last Tuesday. The old goat even went so far as to drive the Pontiac out to Pullings Bridge and sneak up close to the house on foot. Willie was in the feed lot when he saw Emory dancing around just back of the tree line along the creek, jumping up and down and waving like some kind of wild man turned loose to terrorize the countryside. Burl was in the house and Willie headed for the trees.

"Distributor," Emory said.

"What?"

"Distributor. Busted. That's all it was. Fixed good as new."

Willie led Emory farther into the woods, out of sight of the house and they sat down on a log.

"You didn't tear anything off, did you? You didn't do any prospecting on my car?"

"I ain't no claim jumper," Emory said, insulted.
"I do honest work and I fixed that ratty old car good. Honest."

"Honest?"

"You cut me to the quick, boy," Emory said. He broke off a gooseberry branch and ran his hand gently over the stickers.

They walked along the Mauvaisterre back to Pullings Bridge, moving along the edge of steep cutbanks where the creek bent toward them, then dropping down onto mudflats, rising again, always with the brush and weeds close at their legs, clothes soaked from the rain last night.

"Shoot many rabbits in here?" Emory had asked.

"Some."

"Lots of rabbits here. Used to kill lots of them."

Near the bridge, they had turned away from the creek and crossed a large patch of foxtail. Emory moved out ahead and got up a covey of quail and Willie watched as the fat birds arched above the grass and wheeled left, cutting in front of the sun, and settled back to ground at the edge of the green shade thrown up by the trees.

Driving Emory back to town, Willie raced, throwing gravel at every corner, testing. The car was fixed good. Not like new, but still good.

Willie heard Loretta giggle and realized he'd been
staring at the floor. A long, thin cigarette flew from Loretta's lips and settled between her crossed legs. She jumped up, retrieved the cigarette from the floor and stuck it firmly between her teeth.

Kristen touched the corner of her eye with a neatly filed nail and said, "They should have called that guy Mad Dog instead of Bucket." She pushed Willie's hand out of her lap.

"You want more beer?" Willie said.

"And they'll never call him Wise Man. Never."

Willie rattled the tab inside his empty can, then crumpled it and tossed the aluminum wad at Bucket. "Think fast, Ace," he said.

The beer can skittered between Bucket's feet and down the alley. Bucket couldn't think fast enough and his great hips once more made a loud discovery of the floor. Bowlers froze in mid-stride. Bucket stood up regally and walked up to the can. Loretta's jaw began working and she swung into a chorus of Don't Come Home Drinkin' with Lovin' on Your Mind. Kristen put her hand on Willie's knee just before he jerked her down and the beer can whistled above their heads and shattered a jumbo order of french fries that Lloyd Summers was involved with two tables back from the ball rack. Lloyd Summers got up and started moving his arms and legs.
It may have taken Summers three seconds or a day and a half to get around the ball rack and down to the happy bowlers. And when Willie heard Lloyd tell him he'd like it in the hospital, Willie allowed that Lloyd might be right, but it could be a rough go between here and there. Then, there was the noise of people shouting and things breaking. After that, Kristen was lying on top of Willie in the back seat of the repaired Pontiac.

"I didn't know Loretta knew so many songs," Willie said. "I hope she never goes on stage." His mind began searching for places that hurt. It would have been easier and faster to find one that felt good.

"Lloyd handled you very quick," Kristen said.
"She sings like a pinched cat."
"He even carried you out to the car." Kristen smoothed the hair out of his forehead. Willie squirmed. "He said he had such a good time whipping you, it was worth it."

"Get the bottle under the seat."
"Bucket is going to die and Loretta will sing Onward Christian Soldiers at the service."
"Get the bottle."
"She will be married to Lloyd by then, but Lloyd will take it like the fine man he is."
"You're heavier than you look."
"Am I hurting you?"

"You remind me I already hurt," he said. "Get the bottle."

"Hold me, Willie," Kristen said. She rested her face against his neck.

Willie swallowed hard. Things in his throat felt out of place.

"Please hold me." She was shaking now.

"I can't," he said, squirming. "My arm's caught. You're laying on my good arm. The other doesn't work so well."

Kristen raised herself on one elbow. Willie groaned as the bone ground into a place on his ribs that shouldn't have hurt much at all. He freed his arm and let it drop across the small of her back.

"We're safe in the country, now," she whispered. "Feel how quiet it is?"

"No," he said. "My head still feels noisy."

"Quiet yourself in me," she said, breathing steadily against his throat.

"I hate french fries."

"Lose yourself in me."

Willie asked for the bottle one more time, and then he did.
Skirting a marsh inside the levee on the Illinois River. Kristen has driven them along a blacktop road below the bluffs and turned off on a dirt lane that follows the Mauvaisterre across flat bottom land, to a spot where the levee breaks to allow the creek to merge with the river. It is still dark, hot, though the wind has an edge tonight, and the air smells different, unlike the thick, stagnant odor that clings heavily just above the backwater. Now, they will roam through clumps of brown grass and soon they will come to water and cattails, where they will climb up the side of the levee and stop and smoke cigarettes and talk about nothing in particular.

"You liked it, didn't you," Kristen says.

"I've taken worse beatings for worse things."

"I mean you even liked the beating."

"You see that," he says, pointing through the cattails. "Ducks." The small green and blue birds sat motionless on the calm marsh. "They're flying through early this year. Only September and the ducks are flying."

"All the time Lloyd was hitting you, he kept calling you 'Digger' and laughing." Kristen bunches her
fists under her arms. "I don't understand."

"Me and Burl used to have a blind somewhere around here. Used to sit for hours. Cold and wet. Crouched down, shivering in the wind, jumping up now and then to bang away at ducks with an old twelve gauge."

"Were you a good shot?" she says.

"I learned to shoot good trying to miss the ducks. We couldn't afford to waste shells. Plus we needed the meat. But hell, I never wanted to kill ducks and I shot close enough to barely miss. That way, he'd think I was trying." He looks down at Kristen. She is staring at the birds. "Sometimes I missed, killed one by mistake." Her beautiful hair floats behind her in the sharp wind. "Or maybe they were just so stupid they flew into the shot on their own."

"I believe these ducks like people," Kristen says.

"Who knows what ducks think," Willie says. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard." He looks intently at the ducks, as though warning them of something he can't understand, warning them, perhaps, only that they are watched. "All that stopped after we buried her... just before the 'Digger' thing got started."

Kristen sits on the levee and stretches her legs down the slope. Long legs. And he knows now that they're strong and soft and he has been lost inside them. He is next to her now, lying out across the
grass, his hand on her back, and he imagines a place far away where the water and the sky and land all come together and he feels the rain coming up behind, big and loud and scary, washing through them, washing through them, washing out their tracks. "We could go to Wyoming," he says, pushing his hand deep against the muscles in her back.

"Nobody goes to Wyoming," she says.

"Yes, we could go to Wyoming."

"You wouldn't be a good cowboy. You're too much a Calvinist."

"How can I be that," he says. "I don't even know what that means."

"It means you believe in being punished. Like getting beat up. Once, and almost twice in the same week, and for something you think you did wrong when you were a kid."

"You don't think it was wrong?"

"I don't care. That's the difference."

"And you don't care if your grandfather headed a lynch mob?" he says. "Or did you know?"

She edges down the slope, away from his touch. "Listen," Kristen says, "we could get some guns and go to Wyoming and all along the way, we race through these little towns and shoot them up."

"Did you know?"
She turns onto her stomach and shakes the hair from her face. "We'd be famous."

"Did you know?" grabbing her hair and twisting her face up to his. In the moonlight, her throat shines, a long white gash of skin that descends along the open sides of her green blouse to a point above her breasts. "Is that what this is all about? Some kind of kick?"

Then she was crying and behind her face the river, thick and slate colored, swirled against the bank. The wind died off and air from deep inside the marsh crept up the levee, smelling of roots and moss, black water and snakes.

"I guess I knew," she said. "But it wasn't for any kick. At least, not like you mean."

Willie let go of her hair and smoothed it along the side of her face. He bent down and kissed her. "Maybe so," he said. The skin on Kristen's face was bone white and taut about the eyes, and strands of hair clung to her cheeks. Her teeth chattered. "Maybe so," he said, and kissed her again. He heard the deep moan of a barge horn and Kristen turned toward the river. Together, they watched the spotlight on the pilothouse crisscross the river, knifing through the trees along the banks. The ducks stirred on the backwater, making ripples that caught the cool light and slapped among
the cattails. The great, blunt snout of the barge
loomed before them on the river, shattering the thick
water into a luminous wash that pounded against the
mud bank and forever the iron tanks full of oil and
c coal and grain inched by and the light grew brighter,
more jagged in its movement, as though some pilot from
Chicago or St. Louis or Memphis knew there were assassins and spies, lovers out there in the night, and
they had to be ferreted out with that panic-stricken
light and soon the rumble of engines was upon them as
the light slowly moved on toward more dangerous territory, sandbars and river bandits, and the wash was
more luminous still behind the props. Power. It was
power that vibrated deep through the water and mud and
coupled with the bones and flesh of all that had died
and lived around this river, power that quivered in
your legs and hips as you sat on the levee and heard
the diesels fade off and insects once again buzzing.
Willie reached high into the air and, for an instant,
he held the wind in his fingers. Once again, he lay
down with Kristen. This time, the beating did hurt.
Samuel Goreman had to be the only man in the county who could afford dogs that barked this well in the middle of a Saturday night. Willie blew smoke through the screen beside his bed, watched it dissolve into the clear September heat and listened to the dogs coming closer. Kristen Goreman's father was a part-time lawyer and sportsman. He shot bears every fall in Canada and had the hides to prove it. He fished in the Gulf of Mexico. And he caught fish, too. Samuel Goreman had old family money and he could buy dogs expensive enough to be called hounds in a serious way. Aristocratic. After the shooting business at the Hotel, Willie had been worried about Goreman. And, with the little affair at the Ten-Strike last night, and later alone with Kristen, you could be certain of some kind of retaliation. But this number with the dogs seemed a little over-played, even for Goreman.

"Coon hunters."

Willie jerked around and saw his grandfather standing in the door. It seemed that Burl belonged now to a less fragile night, a night where things couldn't get smashed up. Nights like this are my ter-
ritory, Willie thought, the old man's played out from lynchings and illegal burials.

"Coon hunters," Burl said again.


Burl crossed the small room and sat on the edge of the bed, facing out the window. Willie's legs rolled into the old man's hips. Both men shifted away from the touch.

"Listen," Burl said. "You hear that lonesome one? Way out front?" He propped his elbows on the sill and turned one ear slightly toward the darkened trees. "Not a bad sounding dog."

Willie didn't answer. He swung his legs over the bed and reached quickly for his pants. It definitely was going to be harder with the old man thick in the middle of things.

Burl turned inside the room and watched Willie go for his boots. "What's up?"

"Just getting ready for Goreman."

"You been messing with that girl again?"

"Indirectly," Willie said, ready for another blast from the old man. He'd told Burl a few days ago about the Hotel Incident and in the argument that followed, Burl said that it was Samuel Goreman who was County Attorney when they buried his grandmother. So Goreman had that for a club and Willie didn't know if they
could stop him from using it. But forgetting Kristen was too hard. Or, remembering the poisonous orange glow of her face that night at Emory's, maybe forgetting about her was too easy a way out. Anyhow, both Tuesday and Friday nights were about to be called to account.

"Now what the hell," Burl said. His back stiffened. "You either mess or you don't mess." A thick sigh trickled across his pale lips. "I figured you smarter than that. At least smart enough not to get caught." Burl drummed his fingers on the window sill. "Sammy could stand about anything but that."

"Kristen probably told him. I think she likes to hang out with me, then throw it up to him. Must be some sort of disease." He dropped his cigarette into a half-empty glass. Willie watched the old man closely. Burl's one eye seemed to flash with disgust as they followed Willie's hand to the glass. The butt hissed, then the red tip was dark.

"Little Sammy Goreman," Burl said. "Lord, seems like I've been plagued my whole life by that outfit."

"I'd have told him myself if she hadn't." You can't show the old man any uncertainty, any weakness. "Maybe he just heard it around town."

"I should of beat you more," Burl said.

"Right," Willie said, remembering Friday. "That
would have cured it all."

Willie went back to the window and sat down next to his grandfather. The night was a long damp tunnel that started at Goreman's big house in Exeter and ran along Mauvaisterre Creek. Somewhere in that dark house, Kristen was probably asleep and Willie waited, backed up against the end of the tunnel, listening to the dogs sound their way through the tight brush along the creek. Soon, he saw a low, dark form leap high above the weeds below the barn, heading uphill toward the house. The dogs' howls were more demanding now and the weeds churned in a steady wave that spilled across the moon-soaked pasture. Willie pointed them out.

"Taller than the dogs, ain't they?" Burl said.

"I wonder who he'll look like tonight," Willie said. He heard a voice shout jumbled commands at the dogs, but the hounds bore down on the house until they stacked up at the door directly below Willie's window. Willie and Burl watched on carefully craned necks.

Samuel Goreman strode through the moonlight, a magnificent field officer in light twill bush jacket and clean pants. Karl, his son, followed in miniature.


"Karl," Samuel Goreman said in a neat voice,
"quiet these animals." Goreman stood erect among the thrashing dogs, unaffected as they snarled and pounded into his legs. "Karl!" he snapped.

"Hush, Jack," Karl hissed. "Jack, bad dog!" Karl bent down to grab the collar of the lead dog, the big blue that was called Jack. Suddenly, Karl was sucked to his knees on the cement step and the dogs swarmed over him. A large Redbone ran up Karl's back as though it were a ramp and leaped from his shoulders, reaching its bared teeth at the moon. The hound seemed to freeze for an instant in mid-air and Willie saw its chest expand and its shoulders wind back until the dog suddenly launched one clear, true note that sent shivers down Willie's back. For a split-second, the dog dangled from that note, then crashed down onto Karl's head and sniffed at Samuel Goreman's cuff.

Karl lurched after collars, ears, tails, anything on the various dogs, and mumbled, pleaded with them to be still. The dogs remained dogs and soon they had Karl prone and were nuzzling at him and trampling over his back and head and legs. Karl locked his arms over his neck and whined. The lead dog latched his teeth onto Karl's ear, then lay down beside him and pawed at the sky. Karl screamed, obliterating instantly the memory of the Redbone's howl that had been resonating through the back of Willie's skull. Then, Samuel Gore-
man's polished boot flashed in the moon and set the blue dog to screaming too.

"Get up, you stupid bastard," Goreman said. He reached down, laid his hands on Karl's shoulders and hauled him to his feet. Now, the dogs were calm, as though mystified, entertained even, by the sight of Samuel Goreman whirling his son around and slamming him against the house. Calmly, Goreman leaned down and wiped a smudge from his boot. He carefully straightened the creases in his trousers. The blue dog was on its side, panting, tongue stark and liquid on the dark grass. "I should have left you in the car," Goreman said easily.

"Evening, Bwana," Willie said.

Karl looked straight up along the wall. He held his ear with one hand and gripped clapboards with the other. The moon flashed white in his eyes. Samuel Goreman stared at his son. The dogs watched with cocked ears.

"Out for a little stroll in the country?" Burl asked.

Samuel Goreman stepped to the door and knocked. Twice.

"We're not home," Willie said.

"Come on..." Karl started, but his eyes went dim as they shifted down to the bristled hand that was
firmly planted across his mouth. "Mmmmm," Willie heard, then saw Karl's head flatten out across the boards as the hand pressed tighter. A dull shock quivered up through the wall.

"Boy needs a doctor or something, Sammy," Burl said, his voice damp with concern.

Samuel Goreman flinched and again knocked at the door. Twice. Again.

"Ain't he pre-cise," Burl said. "Go let him in. I'll get dressed."

"While you're at it," Willie said, "stick in your eye." He motioned toward the old man's face, the blank, pinched socket above his left cheek. "I don't want him thinking you're trash." He walked beside the old man across the floor. The boards sounded outraged, or maybe just disturbed.

"And you fasten your belt," Burl said. "That's got you in enough trouble already." He turned into his room.

Willie went downstairs and switched on the light. He walked through the kitchen and pulled open the door.

"Hello," Samuel Goreman said.

Willie motioned them into the house. "I'd hate for the dogs to hear this," he said. The Goremans stepped inside. Willie slammed the door. For a moment, the dogs barked enthusiastically.
Samuel Goreman at the table, hands lying open on the red oilcloth, sideburns carefully ragged against his ears and kept a fine theatrical gray, black brows sincere in their worry, just as Willie imagined they might be when Goreman pleaded with a strange, out-of-town jury. Goreman was very good at the velvet glove and iron fist routine. Karl sat beside his father, his head slightly tilted to one side, as though weakening under the weight of blood and pain in his ear. Willie was glad they hadn't brought guns.

"I'd prefer not to be forced to use the law in order to prevent you from seeing my daughter," Goreman said.

Burl shifted in the loud wooden chair. "We ought to get a doctor for the boy's ear," he said.

Karl straightened his head, cracking the dried wound. Blood seeped through new scabs. He looked surprised, relieved.

"Karl will survive," Samuel Goreman said. "Thank you."

Karl slumped farther over the table.

"As I was saying," Goreman continued, "I'd rather not involve the law. But I can assure you I know enough ins and outs to cause you grief, and at little risk to myself." He raised his hand and smoothed back his hair. "You can bank on it," he said.
"Pretty standard stuff, Sammy," Burl said. 

"I can assure you. . ." Goreman began. 

"You done that," Burl said. His face opened into a monstrous grin. "Me and the boy been pretty civilized about this."

"Look, Mr. Goreman," Willie said. 

"Sammy," Burl cut in. "Call him Sammy. He can't stand that."

"Mr. Goreman. . ."

"Sammy!" Burl shouted. "Call him what he is. Sammy."

Karl stirred. He stood up and leaned far across the table, glaring at Burl. His elbows locked and his soft hands fidgeted like small spiders on the table.

Willie leaned back and balanced his chair on two legs. He felt as though this scene, these characters had risen out of some dark corner of the woods and he was both remote from this bad joke, yet bound to it all by water and terrible things people had done, he had done, and by Kristen. And she seemed more and more beyond his reach, his need. Willie was tired. He knew there could be women who would love him better and at less cost. But what did that matter? He heard a night bird screech. The dogs stirred outside the door. Willie bent hard back into the room.

"Mr. Hardwick," Karl said.
"Just Burl. I don't rate a Mr. from you," he said. "Makes me feel cheap. Sit down." Burl waved the boy off with the back of his hand. "We've got a problem with names here."

Karl's fingers went out for the old man's shirt and in that same instant Willie saw his grandfather's cupped palm smash over Karl's mangled ear. The sound of the blow split the room, leaving a chasm that was filled by Karl's voice as he tore at his hair and collapsed on the table. Samuel Goreman pulled his son back into the chair.

"Gentlemen," Burl said acidly, "our sins do run deep."

"My point," Samuel Goreman said, "is that something could happen." He pursed his lips and picked a burr from his sleeve. "For instance, wild dogs could get into your livestock." He rolled the burr on his fingers and let it fall to the floor.

"Just like in the movies," Willie said.

"And, if by some remote chance my dogs were suspected, I'd simply have them shot."

"If you still had dogs," Burl said.

Karl sucked at his cheek. Samuel Goreman crossed his legs and brushed the front of his jacket. Burl fingered a sore on his wrist. Willie ground the heel of his hand into the corner of his eye. Late in the
night, things waited.

Finally, Willie said, "Then, the point is I'd better be a good boy or else."

"You, sir," Samuel Goreman said calmly, "may burn the town to ashes and yourself in the bargain. The point is that my daughter was not born to be dragged through a cheap brawl in a bowling alley or hit policemen over the head, and then be pawed over by some punk in the back seat of an old car."

"Maybe the boy ought to get a better car," Burl said. "And punks is as punks does, Sammy."

"I told you that has no place here," Goreman said between his teeth.

"You see," Burl said, turning to Willie, "about 1935 the river flooded real bad. There wasn't any levees then and it was fall." Burl looked down at his wrist. He had broken open the sore and blood welled up on the flat surface of his arm. "Real strange time of year for a flood, but it happened and there was hay-stacks floating like big gold islands all over the bottom and thousands of ducks feeding off them stacks."

Burl slowly tilted his wrist and the drop of blood rolled off the shelf of bone. The blood fell on the table and made a noise in the quiet room. "Sammy here—I called him Samuel then too—Sammy here hired me to row him out to a stack. Figured he'd use it as a blind
and kill all the ducks in the world. He was just a kid then and I knew it was still too hot for anything like that. But what the hell? He paid me too much money to be giving advice." Burl rolled his head back as if to laugh. His glass eye rotated wildly. Everyone in the room watched.

"So I rowed him out and he jumped on a stack. Well, if there was one thing there was more of than ducks it was snakes." Burl stopped and yawned like a starved wolf at Goreman. Goreman stared at the floor. "Sammy here," he pointed at Goreman with his thumb, "he comes flying off there wearing snakes like a suit of clothes. Most of them slid off while he thrashed around in the water and it weren't till I fished him back in the boat that he started yelping and tore his pants off. That was when we seen the big moccasin wrapped around his thigh." The old man swung his long arms toward Karl and luridly wove his fingers in and out. "Real high up," he said. "Real close to home."

Burl let his arms drop and glared at Goreman. "I don't know why," he said, "that moccasin wouldn't kill you." Then, Burl started to laugh. "It was later on," he said to Willie, "I heard a few stories from some of the girls around town. That was when I started calling him Sammy the Snake. I was real surprised when you had kids," he said to Goreman. And to
Karl, "You're some kind of miracle, boy."

Willie would have laughed too, but everything seemed past that. He imagined the cold ripple of a snake's belly along his leg, polished scales moving in some dark way only the moccasin could know, the broad head pressing wisely up your leg, six feet of death gliding toward home, soft mouth ready, always ready and one last flick of the tail on water and he is inside. Willie watched his grandfather's blood dry on the table.

"I could kill you all for knowing that story," Goreman said quietly.

"Don't sum up your life for me," Burl said. "Just go home. I'm an old man. Get out of my house."

"We haven't settled it about my sister," Karl said. His face shifted into a wary mask.

"That was settled before you came all the way out here," Willie told him. "You just never knew it. Neither did I. Kristen settled it."

"Monday afternoon, Tuesday at the latest," Goreman said, "I'll be in court." His face was slack as he spoke, as though the muscles there had been sucked dry, lifeless. "Old man, that story was better kept to yourself. That afternoon in the boat was the one thing you had in your favor. But you're stupid and Tuesday afternoon there will be a crew of men out here with
shovels and a sheet of paper that says something like, 'Dig...Her...Up.'"

"What?" Willie said. He started to stand. "What? You can't prove..." Burl reached over and held him in his chair. "You can't prove..."

"Doesn't matter," Burl said slowly.

"Exactly," Goreman said. "It doesn't matter. All I have to do is come forward and say that I have suspicions about the circumstances of the death and burial of one Sarah Hardwick. Because I was County Attorney at the time, there will be some talk about my actions then, but I'll call my request an act of conscience. Anyway, talk won't hurt me now and I wouldn't really care if it could." Then, glaring at Burl, "The story of the boat should not have been told. Do you understand?"

"But you can't prove..." Willie said.

"To hell with proof!" Goreman shouted. He jumped up and sent the chair spinning across the kitchen. "I don't have to prove one Goddammed thing! Not one Goddamned single thing!" He bent close to Willie's face, his breath smelling of expensive liquors, jewels bristled and bathed in fine cologne and sweat, teeth clenched and slightly crooked, the edges ground smooth. "Not one Goddamned thing," very close now, "because the first order of business is identifying the body."
Goreman's back stiffened sharply and he began pacing back and forth across the kitchen, waving his hands wildly. "Identify the body! Lovely, isn't it? Identify the body. Personally, I don't care what fourteen or fifteen years buried in a tarpaulin—or whatever you packed her in—I don't care what fourteen or fifteen years buried like that will do to a person. It doesn't bother me what the worms or the moles—maybe even groundhogs—have done. Everything has to survive. Am I correct? Even the smaller, more unsavory creatures of this world. Right? It's nature's law and so I don't care one bit what your wife looks like now, because I am only interested in the pursuit of justice, an instrument of pure justice for that poor woman. Beautiful, isn't it? Justice. Lovely." Goreman folded his arms and stood quiet as death at the edge of the table. "For all this time you've had that story on me and now you've used it and it's gone. How does it feel?" He unclasped his arms and slowly, gently, tenderly massaged Karl's shoulders. "My son."

"Don't," Karl said.

"My son," Goreman said. "Cruel."

"Don't. Please!" Karl wrenched himself free, stumbled to the sink and was sick.

"I could kill you all," Goreman said again, his face strained and twitching.
"Go home," Willie said. "Take your dogs and go home."

Burl stood, ancient, defeated, and popped the glass eye from its socket. He set the glass eye on the table, where it rolled from side to side, moist and glistening, the pale gray iris watching over them as Burl shuffled from the room. Samuel Goreman moved to Karl's side and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, but Karl elbowed him aside, jerked open the door and ran from the house. With both arms rigid at his sides, Samuel Goreman walked after his son.

Outside, Willie stood in the thick grass and felt the dew soak through his boots. Goreman called the dogs awake and they gathered at his feet for the walk back. Willie's head seemed to spin, as though the trees behind Goreman jockeyed for position, shifted in the dark, pressing close to witness this sad little drama, this pitiful defense of a place he'd called home by simple habit and in the swirling dogs he saw bones, an old woman's bones jarred loose and spinning about Goreman's feet, and hair rotted free of the scalp, tangled with the gleaming grass. The grass coiled at Goreman's feet and the blonde moon slipped in and out of the clouds. Kristen, where are you? Sleeping in his house? Burl crowded past Willie. The old man held a shotgun with awful casualness and the muzzle
flash exploded across the yard and dissolved on the spot where the blue lead dog had been standing. The slow sound of the blast echoed through the dark, as though calling awake the dead.

"We're not good people out here," Burl said. Sometimes, we don't even try." He turned and walked back into the house.

Willie watched the other dogs circle the blue corpse, slow, cautious at first, then moving closer, sniffing now at the raw cavity where the dog's heart had once beat, their pink tongues dabbing nervously at the dark blood. As one, the dogs would jump and cower in a ring away from the corpse, as though some deep instinct told them where the fringe of death began, instructed them in the need to close in on death, but only for a short, unaccountable time. Again, the dogs began to tighten the circle. Samuel Goreman waded through the moonlight back toward the trees. He whistled once, and the dogs bounded after him.
The house was quiet now and as Willie stretched out in bed, he heard the old man downstairs rattling around. Who could figure the Goreman mess? He yawned and wrestled the pillow. Seemed like every time you looked up, there was something new going on. The lynching and bad blood between two families. He'd known about that all along. Bad blood. Stupid business. Why couldn't he get it out of his head? Just throw it away like so much dirty water, the way Kristen did. The way Kristen said she did. And it wasn't his fault either that Goreman had a bad run of luck with snakes. Lying on his side, he looked down onto the yard, the dog. Tired. Not only tired, weary, deep down in the bones weary. To hell with all those people, all those stories they kept dredging up and throwing at each other like knives. To hell with that noise. Let Burl identify the body. Ghost in the closet, ghost in the closet. Well, then, ask them to supper and stop all this craziness.

Willie heard the kitchen door bang shut and below his window he saw Burl move across the yard toward the dog. Halting, stop action, the way things look when your eyes won't focus and the wind picked up now,
catching the old man's shirt, making him humpbacked as he looked furtively into the woods, thin shadow always distorted as the old man circled and the wind, faster and faster, tore at his clothes and the dog, wind riffling over the fine hairs on its flanks, cold air moving to clot the dark, sleepy wound. Burl stopped, glanced once more into the woods, then grabbed the hind paws and began dragging the dead animal down toward the Mauvaisterre, lurching against the dog's bulk, tripping, going faster, running, sidestepping, silver trail behind the dog cutting a slow curve down the hill, past the barn, animals cringing in their pens, silver curve cut in the ground and disappearing into the trees.

Ghost in the closet, ghost in the closet. . .

On the night his grandmother died, Willie believed he had done something wrong because she kept staring at the ceiling, her face a cruel shadow across the far side of the bed and the blizzard kept breaking ice loose from the power lines, making the single lightbulb flinch and Sarah Hardwick's shadow heave and dance, and at those rare moments when her eyelids would loll closed, then open, he saw in that movement not pain or fear, but a casual turning away from some mistake, which the boy hunted for in his memory but could never catch. His grandfather coughed loudly behind him and
Willie shuddered.

The bottom of the boy's ribs were level with the thin mattress and he rubbed his hand along the rope lacing that was strung through rich, walnut rails on the bed and when Willie pressed his chest and elbows on the bed and buckled his knees, the mattress sagged under his weight and she rolled toward him and he reached out to brace her hip, then pulled back sharply and stood up. Burl coughed again, then began to choke and gasp and Willie whispered, "Careful, you'll wake her," and Burl said, "She can't hear nothing."

Willie's gut fluttered. "How do you know?" throat burning as he faced the old man and scratched behind his thighs at the ropes.

"My pop made that bed by hand," Burl said, "over a hundred years ago."

"How do you know she can't hear?"

"Made it out of walnut before it was worth anything. Just all we had."

"Stop it," louder this time.

"Now, walnut's a big deal. Sharpies come around in the middle of the night. Cut down the trees, steal them."

And Willie screaming, "No! You can't talk like that," grabbing the old man's shirt, pounding his chest.
"First it was all we had and now it's something to steal." Burl raised his large arms and pinned the boy close to him. "Easy, Willie." He covered the whole side of the boy's head with one hand.

"Is she going to die?" voice muffled against the flannel shirt.

"Lots of people died in that bed since my pop put it together."

"Is she?" The shirt smelled old and tired as dirt, worn too long, bleached out too many times by the woman in the bed.

Burl let the boy go and stood, walked to the bedside and tilted his ear close to his wife's startled mouth, then straightened and tucked the blanket more tightly around her throat. "Let's go in the other room," he said, taking Willie by the shoulder and pulling him away, tangling the boy's feet and Willie started to fall. Burl jerked him upright.

"Somebody's got to do something," Willie said. "Get to town, a doctor, something." The storm didn't matter. If the roads were blocked, then he'd walk. He would, cross-country if that's what it took.

"You need to be in bed," Burl guided the boy into the hall and toward the far end of the house.

"Something might happen," Willie said. "Don't you see? Something, you know, might happen," voice
working itself loose, "you can't make me! You can't..."
His body spun and shoulders slammed against the wall.
He heard a distant noise, his head crashing against
the cracked plaster, and his feet once again in motion.
Hands dressed him for bed. Sheets were cold and white
and safe and he curled his knees up into his chest and
cupped his hands around his groin, belly clenched, re­
membering the old man's words coming out cold and cer­
tain as a new chisel biting soft wood. "You do what I
say. That's it."
"Will she die this time?"
"She's old, Willie."
"Can't we do nothing?"
"I'm old." Burl clawed at his face and when he
pulled away his hand, Willie saw how the mean scratches
were etched at sharp, insistent angles against the
creases along his forehead. "You want too much," Burl
said and switched off the erratic light and Willie
hunted someplace wide and open behind his eyes, that
place where the angels found him.

Wind and snow grated against the house and windows
shook. Willie grew big inside himself and felt the
room swell. A rat clawed inside the wall and Willie
clenched his toes, rubbed his ankles together and drew
his legs higher. You can't tell where the rats are,
but you can hear them screech and the wind and when
you try to see into corners you feel sweat squeeze out along the small of your back, like the last time you cleaned the corn dump and there were rats. The first one was dead and he kicked it into a corner. It was dark and the pit smelled old and musty, like blankets stored away too long. He worked his fingers around the gears and chains. He tried to be careful. Dark. It bothered him, the way he kicked the rat aside and he couldn't see his feet. He listened until it seemed he heard the dead rat scramble off into some special corner of its own. He twisted around in the crawl space and checked his pants cuffs, made sure they were still bound tight around his ankles. That's where the rats try to get at you. Again, he reached carefully ahead into the light, into the machine.

The next day Willie went back to finish and the dead rat wasn't a dead rat anymore but only the skeleton of a dead rat and he heard the rest of them laugh and suck their teeth from behind holes they'd clawed and chewed through solid concrete and he climbed out of the pit and ran across the pasture, thinking you're crazy if the rats don't bite you and yellow if they do, remembering sharp teeth on gears he hadn't cleaned and now couldn't. He hid in a fence row and closed his eyes.

Ropes creaked on the other side of the wall and a
small voice inside him said, Big hands hurt you that day. Sweet Angel laughed at you in a big voice and slapped you, left you against barbedwire. All of this was the beginning and it snapped inside Willie's head as he turned away from the window, the shattered night and the silver trail left by Burl and the dead dog and in that instant of turning, he remembered how five years later he was fourteen and the poppies were famous all around Exeter. Burl was hard about strangers seeing the graveyard, but Willie told everybody about the poppies and sometimes, sitting where he was now, he would look over the top of the tall, snarled row of spirea bushes that shielded the poppies from the road and he would see a cloud of dust swell up from the road and stop where the lane turned down into the gully. He knew it was somebody out for a glance at the poppies and usually the car would swing into the lane and turn around, stop for a moment and if the angle of sun was right, glass and chrome would glitter against the green backdrop. No cars today, though, and it felt good to sit chin deep in the orange flowers and watch their black eyes flash after the slow breeze from the west.

Willie leaned his cheek against the roughly chiselled edge of the stone marker and stared across the gouged letters to a spot in the air where orange flowers
joined with orange sky. The sun was almost gone and Willie was sleepy from supper. His skin crawled with heat and he heard Burl call and stood and walked back down to the house, where Burl sat on the back step peeling away bark on a stick. He motioned the boy to sit against a stump. "Good having you out of school," he said, "get lots more done."

Willie nodded and closed his eyes. The world felt too alive, too much closed in on him. Even the grass seemed to grow around his boots as he watched. He scratched a hole in the ground with his finger. Old Mrs. Crawford told him once you could find the devil if you dug deep enough in the ground around here, you could watch the devil run through tunnels hardly big enough for a field mouse to hide in and if you just dug deep enough, the devil would be there dragging his pointy red tail and peeking out from behind the roots. He won't hurt you, Mrs. Crawford told all the children, he wouldn't dare in this country. Willie didn't believe in the devil. He dug now with three fingers, patting the scattered dirt into a hard mound, pressing torn-out roots below the surface. Probably keep growing, he thought, you can't kill anything around here.

"Tired?" Burl asked.

Willie nodded and shoved dirt back into the hole.

"Still soft from school," Burl said. "I never
went to school. Well, through second grade, but I never learned nothing but how to write a little. Got some reading, too." He dropped the stick and twisted a strip of green bark around his finger. "But I'm smart."

"Can I go to town tomorrow?" He'd heard the old man's school history too many times.

"But I never walked any long ways through the snow like most folks claim they did in them days." He winked at Willie and mud pressed into the corners of his eye and Burl rubbed it out with his sleeve and swore at the dust. "Smart," he said.

"I want to go swimming," Willie said.

"My Gran'pa, he was dead before I was born," Burl said, leaning back under the shade of the shallow porch. "Never had no grandfolks while they was alive." The last of the sun cut a bright slash across his legs.

"I like to go swimming in the pool," Willie said. "The water's nice and clear and I miss my friends out here over the summer."

"Grew up without seeing many people. Specially girls," Burl said and crossed his ankles, stirring the dust.

"Are you going to keep this up with the old days?" Willie asked. He knew it all by heart, the story about James Hardwick drifting up from Kentucky with an axe
and a stolen mule, burdened under most of the sins known to man and a few maybe only God had the patience to trouble with. Over and over he'd been told how there were never many Hardwicks around here and most of them were dead now and growing poppies back up the hill, and then Burl bent forward and planted his elbows on the knees of his grimy overalls and said, "You can't go to town tomorrow, I'm not ready to turn loose of you."

"Then I'm going to bed."

"Did you know my folks moved to Louisiana in a wagon right after they was married?"

The boy had known that since he was old enough to understand words. Willie got to his feet and walked toward the door. He looked down at his grandfather. "After they got set up they went to the burying of a child and that ground there was so wet they couldn't keep the coffin down."

"Let me by. I want to go to bed."

"And she made him come home. All that travel and come back," shaking his head.

Willie crowded past the old man and yanked open the screen door and stood in the kitchen, staring at the scarce, long hairs on the back of Burl's neck.

"It's wet here," Burl said, "but we can keep things in the ground."
The sun was down now, but inside the house the air was close and still and the boy discovered the smell of burned food and sweat and neglect rumbling in his stomach and he kicked the door and it banged emptily on loose hinges. "I'm sick of work and it's only June," he shouted at the old man. "I'm sick of your stupid stories and your keeping me bottled up here."

"When we was little," Burl said, "me and Emory used to swim in that big hole in the creek south of the barn. There was catfish big enough you could ride on their backs and even the water. . . ."

Willie turned away and stomped through the kitchen and upstairs. He undressed and threw his clothes into the corner, buried himself in the lumpy mattress and glared out the window. Maybe tomorrow he'd sneak off and cut through the timber to Darrall's house because old Mrs. Crawford was always good for a laugh and Marlene was due in for one of her quick visits. Marlene always brought her son expensive presents and drove down from Chicago in that big white car and it was good to be around Darrall after Marlene visited, but better to be there with Marlene. Sometimes it wasn't so good, either, something dangerous and sad about Marlene and her bright clothes and sometimes the presents were found smashed up or just disappeared altogether and Mrs. Crawford would be mean as a stick.
Wrestling again with the pillow, Willie heard Burl climbing the stairs, long steps dragging over the hall floor. Can't sleep. Can't sleep. Ghosts in the closet, all choosing tonight to come out and say hello. He cracked his knuckles and felt again the awful cold that soon turned a boy's hands numb, so that he was lifting out chunks of frozen ground with arms that were useless clubs and the old man broke through the frost-line with the pick and they were in mud, the two of them, in mud that seeped through the cracks in worn-out rubber boots, clay mud that wouldn't turn loose of the spade even after you'd pried it out in yellow slabs, and the cold, oh God, the cold came from somewhere far off and even as they dug deeper, the ground couldn't bear up under it and snow swirled along the bottom and into the neat corners of the grave. But all of this came after... 

It was the hands that woke him, pushed him off the safe ledge of sleep. Dry lids ground against his eyes as he tried to pretend he was fully awake, hadn't lost himself in the dark. "Darrall Crawford's got polio," Willie mumbled, understanding perfectly what he had said. He stared at his grandfather, bewildered. "Polio. He'll always need crutches and maybe... don't you see?"

"I see," the old man said. "Sure, I see." He took his hand away from the boy's shoulder and paced
the length of the bed.

Willie sat up in the faint light and looked around him. The corners were brightening now and clear cold radiated off the window. The massive cottonwoods shimmered with ice and came to Willie as nightmarish sticks that propped up the sky. The storm was gone and Willie wanted to cringe in the face of all that empty blue.

"We can't help your friend," Burl said. "We've got enough work of our own." He pulled the covers to the foot of the bed, walked to the lone chair and tossed Willie's clothes in a pile on the sheets.

"Darrall doesn't know where his mother went," Willie said, getting dressed. "Do you know where she went?"

"Who?"

"Darrall's mother. Do you know?"

"Everything's frozen over. We'll have a rough go of it."

"I hate chores in the winter," Willie said. They fed ear corn to the cattle, breaking the ears over the feed bunk to make them small enough that the cattle would eat cob and all. "Always smash my hand on the bunk. I always do that and it just about kills me."

Burl was staring from the door, his eyes slightly crossed as the glass one wandered aimlessly and his mouth was slack. "Willie?"
'But it's always good to get in to breakfast. . .'

'Willie?' 

'And when I get to school, maybe I'll hear something about Darrall's mom.'

'There won't be no school today,' Burl said, walking toward the boy.

'She sure is pretty,' Willie said, embarrassed.

Burl took the boy's arm and led him out of the room and down the hall. 'Roads are still full,' he said. 'Still can't get out.' They passed the half-open door of the other bedroom and Willie froze.

The handsewn sections on the quilt now spread the whole length of the bed, looking to Willie like an aerial photograph of the land. And later, he remembered, it was as if the photograph had come alive, taken on the easy rise and fall of the country, the slopes leading down to where there might be gullies to see from the air, and low green places where you might find a creek if you walked them and all so full and soft with color you could fall even from this high and be swallowed up by that color and never hurt, never find yourself in those warm cut-out fields that shimmered in the bright light focused off the bare walls and new snow outside. Willie blinked and thought he heard an angel laugh.

'After awhile she just weren't here no more,' Burl
Willie looked at the old man, wanting to speak, but his stomach felt full of beating wings.

And even now, years later, Willie's arms could still retrace the exact motion that threw the spade up out of the hole and still hear the cold sound made by the spade as Burl stuck it into the mound of dirt. A big hand reached down and pulled him out by the arm. Willie stood on the dirt, tucked the handle of the spade under his arm and leaned against it. He rested, breathing hard.

"You're standing up to this pretty good," Burl said. He held his hands awkwardly and stared into the hole. "This ain't right for a boy, I guess. I wouldn't know," he said. "That woman. Goddamn her. She took it all away."

Willie's eyes tightened against the sun. He didn't want to hear his grandfather talk like this. The grief was private and hard and it tried to work itself out in the straining against mud and now that was over and the worst was yet to do. Marlene, Marlene, she's so pretty. He looked far down at the mottled walls of the grave and smelled fresh clay and shivered.

"We're doing a wrong thing," Burl said, "just burying her on the spot like this." He turned the boy around. "You remember that. You remember what we're
doing good. I couldn't wait out the plow. You remem­ber how hard a thing this is." He shook Willie by the shoulders, knocking the spade from under his arm. Then, he stopped, turned, and started down the hill.

Willie followed. His feet crunched through the crust of ice as he cut a separate path through knee-deep snow. At the back door he stood for a moment and stared into the thick, yellow light of the house.

A door opened in the other bedroom and Willie heard Burl rummaging around in the closet. Putting away the shotgun, maybe. The old man sounded happy, mumbling to himself words you couldn't understand, whistling an unrecognizable tune every now and then.

Willie propped himself up in bed and reached for another cigarette. Sleeping in his house. What was her room like? Little girl pink? He'd do something like that to her. And a canopied bed, ruffles, white offsetting the pink. Dolls, maybe. You could do a lot with dolls, balancing them all over the place, talking to them, make up adventures about kings, a Holly­wood kind of room, cheap and beautiful, quiet, except for the rustle of Kristen turning slowly between crisp sheets, pretty, and the shadows through intricately laced curtains made an exotic pattern on her face and one bare arm and shoulder draped across the bedclothes,

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long, smooth skin, a woman in bed, her fingers relaxed, slightly curled, squeezing closed now and then, perhaps in a dream, and the dark design of her curtains shifting each time the wind shifts, summer flowers and vines becoming snakes in a moment, her fingers tightening, all different shades of the same woman. Who could understand it? There's something about water that wants to take you away and Willie knew things couldn't be the same after Friday night on the river. Emory could have been right, looking for gold, prospecting for what he'd found diving and riding catfish in the Mauvaisterre sixty years ago and if people die sick and old in bed or get hanged or driven mad, you do what you can to get through, you hold on to what's available and Kristen was better than locking yourself up in a junkyard. Willie knew that. That was what the river meant and what the Mauvaisterre meant and even crazy old Mrs. Crawford must have known that, raving about the devil, believing in that because there was a steady diet of proof, though she remained alive.

There was a loud crash in the next room, then great quiet. Willie climbed out of bed and went to find Burl. The old man lay on the floor, his right hand gripping an open drawer of the dresser, muscles straining to pull himself up, his right leg pumping back and forth, heel scraping on the floor again and
again, head twisted on his right shoulder and the left side of his body slack, useless, and beside him lay a mother-of-pearl box broken open by the fall, the satin lining shredded and ruined by age, a comb, brush and mirror, all yellowed and with brilliant red cardinals painted on their backs, cardinals on the broken case, a woman's things hidden away and covered with stunning red birds that had never flown and the mirror, into which a young woman once smiled as she fixed her hair, lay scattered in a thousand pieces across the floor, cutting the old man's foot as he tried and tried again to stand.