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Beyond the Prow

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BEYOND THE PROW

By

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Thesis

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Creative Writing

Beyond the Prow

Chairperson: Kevin Canty

Co-Chairperson: David Gates

A collection of fictional stories.

Beyond the Prow

My brother, Neil, said I needed to come up. 'I don't know, Ty,' he said, 'this could be our year.'

'What are we now,' I said, 'a team? And how long has it been, anyway?'

He said fishing would beat painting houses. 'The air is clean,' he said. 'It's better than breathing paint fumes.'

'What about the diesel?' I asked.

'Nevermind the diesel,' he said. 'Listen,' he said, 'Callie's gone and I'm full time on this boat now. I'm trouble at the bars. I need you here.'

I decided to go. Painting walls into uniform colors was easy to leave. I took a ferry up from Washington and that was all it took to get me to Juneau.

When I got off the ferry, Neil was there among the others, evident, though maybe just to me, in his stained gray sweatshirt. He wore a mangy beard and wasn't as thin as I remembered, and even though it was getting late, he drank a large cup of coffee as we drove to the harbor. 'All I did after Callie left was eat,' he said. 'But I've been dropping weight. I think the coffee's helping.' He took his hands off the wheel and slapped his gut, then mine. 'Skinny man,' he said, 'I can feel your ribs.' But there was no need to respond. We were zooming past tall pine trees, consuming distance, curving down toward the harbor in a fantastic blue twilight I'd never seen before.

When we arrived at the harbor, Neil insisted on carrying my one bag, and I followed him out of the parking lot, down the ramp to the docks. Beyond us, the channel

stretched vast and promising, a calm silver runnel. ‘This could be a big opener,’ Neil said as we made our way to his boat.

I asked if he had run into any trouble with the others.

‘They keep their distance,’ he said, almost proud, it seemed. ‘Up here,’ he said, ‘stories get around.’ Then he spat on the hull of a boat called the Sea Change. ‘Stupid name,’ he said.

It was calm in the harbor and the blue twilight still lingered. I considered what it might take to defend him if the owner stepped out. Nothing came to mind. ‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘really stupid.’

We went out the next morning. Neil said he’d taken care of everything and I believed him. It was all new to me and I was content not asking many questions. I made coffee and he worked the wheel and, for a while, there was a feeling we both seemed to have bought into, some sense that we were in the middle of a good, new thing. Of course, I didn’t tell him this. Besides, the engine roared too loud for conversation.

We dropped our lines and trolled for hours among the other boats, and each time I hauled, Neil came onto the deck and shook his head. Fish were coming up every time, but he didn’t seem to like the numbers, whatever they were. They delighted me, though, gleaming silver and dancing on the deck.

After a few hours of this I told him to come back and look at the seagulls with me. It seemed far too early for the man to have already lost his spirit, and though this might have been common for all fishermen, I felt that as a new presence, I had a role in fixing morale. The birds been hovering just beyond our stern, some snapping at the guts I

pitched overboard while cleaning fish, and I'd turned the disposal into a sort of game. There were only a few at first, but now, there were probably more than ten. They hovered there, flapping and screaming, and for seagulls, they were sort of hopeful, I thought. I picked up a piece of fish lung and tossed it out and we watched one beak it. 'I like that sonofabitch,' Neil said. 'He'll survive. There's nothing out here but your own fighting will.' Then he picked up part of a liver and flung it at the birds, and for a moment, it was like an older time we'd shared but seldom recalled. Of course, not wanting to spoil our game, I didn't tell him this.

Maybe we'd quit looking ahead, because there was a sudden dinging of someone's emergency bell and Neil grabbed the rear wheel and swerved us away from another boat. We scraped its hull and some of its blue paint came off onto our boat, leaving a gash there about the size of a fish. Neil, looking out toward, or perhaps beyond the other boat, asked if it belonged to a man named Frank. Then he answered his own question. 'I'll bet he wants a few words,' he said. He dropped into neutral and went out onto the deck.

They shouted for over a minute, then I heard Frank say, 'I'll see you back in town.'

I had ideas about what that meant.

'Let's take it easy,' I said to Neil, standing at his side like a sentry or a child.

'I'm not pushing it any further today,' he said. 'It's not about pride, you know. And I'm not scared of Frank, either -- I'm just not going to push it. I'm not getting a fine. I've got this boat to pay for. I've got a lifestyle to maintain. That's a lot for one person.'

He stood there, his focus cast far beyond the water. Then I told him a few things. I told him he was in the right, told him he was misunderstood, and Neil's far look came back, like he'd been waiting for exactly those words. 'Anyway, it was probably his fault,' I said.

'I knew you were here for a reason,' Neil said. Then he clapped his hand on my shoulder and gave me a very direct look, but with the sun as it was, I saw my figure doubled in his pupils, so I went back to the stern and began cleaning.

After we docked, we went into town and stayed there until the bars began to close. I think this accounted for much of the lifestyle Neil had mentioned. He spoke a few times about where we might fish next then went outside to smoke. I began talking to another captain at the table next to ours, a lady who knew, or at least knew *of* Neil, and soon we were all driving back to the docks together. We never saw Frank.

The other captain and I were in the backseat. She went by Tess. I was working my hands around and she was doing things to my neck, and Neil was eyeing the rearview mirror, so I started asking him if we were there yet. Maybe we'd feel our childhood in that. I didn't know what you do with a man, a brother, in that situation. His focus went back to the road. I looked past him, trying to get his view. The sky's blue glow was there. I found it in the water then lost it to the woods as we ran the curves down toward the docks. But a dull pang had settled in my gut, some sense that I might never know the guy much beyond the work and small trips we shared. Or maybe that was just how I decided it was.

Soon, Tess whispered, 'When we get to the harbor, follow me,' and I turned back to her.

I know I went to sleep aboard Tess's boat, because I woke up there, sometime later, to muffled shouts. I woke up from a dream of dying fish, wide-eyed and writhing in their own blood. Tess was breathing in gentle pulses beside me. The shouting was still going, but when I looked out the scuttle, I only saw a dark blue. I got up. It had been warm there with Tess and I ached getting up and when I opened the cabin door, the shouting got louder. Then someone made a yelping sound and I stepped out. I watched a figure with an ax resting on his shoulder go behind some boats and I vaguely saw another guy on the ground, holding his head in his palms.

'Everything okay?' Tess said from down in the hull.

'Just going to get some air,' I said.

I got off the boat and went over to the guy on the dock.

He was awake but he looked pretty bad. Maybe he was good-looking before, but now his face was bloody and swollen. The blood had spread like roots across his face -- dark roots, with the light like it was.

I was holding a bunch of rags, which I must have grabbed from the cabin. I said, 'Can you hold this to your head?'

He took the rags and kept looking at the ramp and the parking lot.

I was on my knees close beside him, listening to the tide slap against pilings and boats as he cleaned his face. I don't know exactly when I knew it was Neil. 'Ty,' he was saying. 'Ty, is he still here? Ty, did you hear me?'

I guess he'd been saying other things before that, but none of them stuck. 'What happened?' I asked. I had my ideas, but now, I wanted to know more.

'Frank hit me with the butt of an ax,' he said. 'How do I look?'

I stood up. This was an image I wasn't exactly surprised to meet, but the man's face was awful, only familiar enough to suggest a relation.

'You know, Ty,' Neil said, 'if you hadn't made me play with those damn birds, none of this would've happened.'

'I came a long way,' I reminded him. 'And already, you've managed a wreck and a fight. You're lucky you're not at the bottom of the harbor,' I said. 'I want to believe this is some sort of act and that you see the others around here as more than rivals.'

'I'm not in this business to make friends,' he said.

Then he walked the same route Frank had walked, going behind the boats, and I heard his feet on the metal gratings when he went over them, quieter each time.

The sky was clouded and dimly glowing, and the mountains beyond the channel were still dark and untextured. Tess was working at her stove and I stayed out and paced the dock near her boat, listening for the metal sounds as though I knew my brother would be coming back. It smelled of diesel and rotten fish and mist was gently falling. Once, I tried calling my brother's name, but it clotted in my throat.

And I guess some time passed, because Tess leaned out to tell me she had cooked some macaroni.

'I'm going to look around,' I said.

'Where?' she said. 'You don't know where he is.'

I breathed in the scent of spilled fuel. 'This was some idea,' I said. 'I'll be back.'

‘I’ll save you a bowl,’ Tess said, ‘but I’m not waiting.’

I walked over the loud metal gratings and I didn’t see anyone, but I kept walking, down the entire dock, then up the ramp to the unlit parking lot. I don’t know what I had expected to be up there, but I saw a bus station across the road. Ferries, I remembered, ran every day. I heard nothing but my breathing and the creaking of the docks. I looked down at the harbor, but all I took in, all I really saw, was that cabin light, still on, still there in bright relief against the dark.

Then it blacked out and I rubbed my palms together against a sudden chill, or my sudden awareness of a chill already there.

I ran my fingers over the cool, misted railing, and I gripped it tight as if to steady myself. I could see the dark rim of mountains, the channel and the harbor from where I stood. It was fine to look at. The boats were calm, listing in duplicate rows. Someone’s bell pinged. Neil could have been down there, and I turned and started toward the bus station, and he could still be there for all I know.

Unhitched

“Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road-- Only wakes upon the sea.” -Antonio Machado

Evenings, the dust and smudges on my window sparkle as the sun declines.

We are lying in bed, balanced on our sides, staring at this and that. According to the clock on my wall, we have been at this for nearly two hours.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ I say. I say it in as shallow and light a tone as I think I can offer. My eyebrows raise as I wait. But she stays silent and I only wait.

I get up and go to the window.

There is that end of the day bustle. There are those people just walking to walk.

‘It’s something outside,’ I say.

‘Then get the fuck out,’ she says.

I go out and go down the sidewalk, and when I see the first car coming, I take a step off the curb and think, ‘What if?’ But that’s all. I just think it. I don’t even follow the images to their natural end.

I turn and check my window. It’s dark behind the glass, but I can still see her standing there, a faint sketch of a woman, looking down. I wave, scooping the air toward me, and she goes away. I stand there a moment, hoping. Then a light goes on inside and I think maybe she’s trying to tell me something. So I go back up with a little hope.

But the knob is locked. I work it back and forth, back and forth. I do it for no good reason. I knew it was locked after my first try. But, I think, this is my place, and I'm locked out, and who is she now? A boarder? I give the wood a few good pounds. But nothing changes. I think on this and that. She's locked me out, locked herself in. For now, at least, this is how it is.

Now, I'm thinking about work. What else is there to do? I have less than an hour and I plan to show up as scheduled. My boss, Quentin, is always giving me back pats for being punctual. He tells me I'm in the top five percent of his employees at the casino. Just for being on time. That and a decent sense of numbers is all it takes. So why would I stick around here?

Through the door, I say, 'I need my work clothes, honey.'

There is some movement. Footsteps and such. I hear the window lock click, the suction of my new plastic sealant coming unstuck, and when I get back outside, my clothes are in the yard, limp and flat, as if a man had just dissolved. The window above is already closed.

I gather the pile. I pick up my shiny vest, my black pants, my white shirt with the buttons. It's all there. Great. I change in the alleyway, store my plain clothes in a bush, then go to work.

At work, at the casino, I try and focus on everything I do. This is no time for getting loose and careless with my dealing and my counting. This is no time for being unprofessional. But, under the vest and dress shirt, my skin is burning and the air I suck is stale.

After an hour, three gamblers are at my table. Two men who call each other boss are two empty chairs apart from a very large woman. The three seem to have settled in. Already, I've raked in more than two hundred of their dollars. And yet they smile, each in their own way. They smile at one other, at me, at the whole damn casino. I think this is fun for them. Good Tuesday night fun here in this reeling, chaotic timesink.

I want a clock to monitor until this is over, something that pings at the right hour. But here, well, here they give you bright lights and the occasional sound of coins pinging into trays, day upon day, time be damned.

'How long until our next card, boss?' one of the men says.

'Sorry, sir,' I say and flop over their cards. 'Blackjack, blackjack, blackjack,' I say as I flop. Some people like it when I say that. It seems to give them hope before they've seen what turns up, and that adds something. No one gets a blackjack this round, but the three laugh. They laugh as I rake in over fifty of their dollars. If I keep counting, it will all be fine.

I pitch around the cards again and wait. Now, I just see her, see her over and over in my mind. *She is there beside me in the bed. She is lying there with her face in the crook of her arm. I'm leaning against the wall, dragging my fingers through her hair, petting her and not talking because she's now my old dog.* No. 'Blackjack, blackjack, blackjack,' I say, quickly flopping.

'What,' the woman says, 'the fuck?'

'You forgot to ask us if we wanted to hit or not, boss,' one man says.

'What the fuck?' the woman says. 'I was hot.'

'He just forgot,' the man says. 'It's okay.'

'It's not okay,' the woman says. 'I was hot, godddamnit.'

I tell them I'm sorry. I tell them I got distracted. But it doesn't matter what I tell them. The woman slowly gets up and goes to the pit boss and the pit boss relieves me, sends me to Quentin's office.

'I am disappointed,' Quentin says. 'What happened out there?'

'I'm not feeling well,' I say.

'You look fine,' he says. 'Your face is bright. You look, like, healthy.'

'I'm going home,' I say.

'I need you out there,' he says. 'You're not going home.'

I stand up.

'You're going to regret this,' he says. 'You're going to kick yourself in the morning and you won't have my sympathy.'

'I'd squat naked onto an anthill before I'd take your sympathy,' I say.

I suppose he fired me then, but I'm already out of his tiny space, making for the great, tall doors at the front.

It was dark outside but misty. Arch lamps glowed beyond their thick plastic coverings.

Though I'd been able to avoid it for weeks, I got on the streetcar to visit my brother Uptown. I figured we'd talk for a bit, then I'd ask him if I could sleep on his couch.

I got on with a few others carrying heavy bags. At least they looked heavy the way their backs hunched and their faces pointed down.

The streetcar operator waited as we paid our fares, his expression imperturbable behind small, round glasses.

I realized I didn't have the fare.

I must not have seen it, my back was turned, but someone had apparently put an extra dollar in. The operator said, 'You're in luck.' Then he let me through.

Quickly we were off, grinding along the rails together. The brief, cheerful trill of the signal bell silenced a woman across the aisle who had been humming softly to herself. I only noticed her because she'd stopped her melody. I could have said anything to her, but when she glanced over, I turned away because she looked, to me, less than hopeful.

The building lights glowered into the streets as we went down Canal. After dark sets in, the hour doesn't matter out there. It all looks about the same, night to night, until natural light returns. If you don't pay attention, if you fall into retracing old, easy patterns, you can exhaust yourself senseless, reeling in the electric verve.

I work odd hours; I should know.

Downtown blanked the sky until we got under the overpass. When we came out, it was a wider space. We went along the broad avenue, passing its entangled oaks and mansions.

After a few stops of this, I got off and started in the direction where I hoped I could live, at least for a night or until my brother ran out of pity. The neatly parceled spaces shrank and dimmed and cluttered. Arch lamps flickered, burned or remained dark. The enormous trees went away.

I walked up a cracked stoop and rapped on an old door. Windowpanes rattled from my knocking, then they rattled from the footsteps inside. Freddy came to the door in shorts and nothing else. It was dark behind him.

‘What happened?’ he said.

After about a minute of me babbling, he put on a shirt and shoes and said we were going down the street to a place called Tracy’s.

‘Never heard of it,’ I said.

As we left, he looked me over and said, ‘Untuck your shirt, then take off that awful vest and bowtie. Looking like that, you’ll get robbed for sure.’

‘Looking like what?’

‘Like a tight, sparkly asshole.’

I obliged him, though as we walked, I found nothing in that stretch of neighborhood to peak my fear.

A breeze nudged the delicate things of the area into sounds.

We passed a bamboo cluster growing near the curb, its dry leaves and stalks clicking together gently the same way they must have for countless others.

‘We’ve had two muggings here in the past month. Right here. This bamboo’s like a curtain,’ Freddy said. ‘I don’t blame you for trying not to ever come here.’

‘I haven’t avoided anything.’

‘No, I get it. Six hours without whats-her-name and rainbows must be tough on a man.’

‘I’m just in a strange place,’ I said.

‘Well, don’t try and hug me,’ he said.

There was nothing I could see that was special about Tracy’s.

It had that common low light about it. People sat at tables that were wooden and stained, trading jokes and babbling.

At the back of the room, a woman with her head in a red bandana sat punching buttons on a video poker machine. She leaned to one side of her chair. A man sat there beside her, pinching his chin with one hand, the other clenched on his thigh.

I suddenly had the urge to take this man away from where he sat. I looked for him to do something then Freddy ordered gin drinks and we just sat there at the bar for a moment.

‘So tell me,’ he said, ‘what are you hoping for?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I guess I’d like to move out to Florida at some point.’

‘No, no, no,’ Freddy said. ‘I mean now.’

‘Well, I needed a place to stay tonight.’

‘No, I mean what do you want out of *me*?’

‘Your couch, I guess.’

‘That’s it?’

‘What do you want me to say, Freddy? I don’t ever know what you mean.’

Freddy made tiny circles with his cup then tossed back what remained, gulping loudly, exhaling through his teeth.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘I’m on the verge of almost changing myself here. I can’t keep explaining things to you.’

‘I want you to come work for me,’ he said.

‘And do what?’ I said.

‘This isn’t me playing around right now,’ he said. ‘This isn’t me pitching underhand. I’m offering you a gig.’

‘Then what?’ I said.

‘I can’t tell you,’ he said, ‘I really can’t tell you how lucky you are right now to be my brother and not just some poor drunk who just shit on my generosity. You’re not the only one who counts here.’

Then he left.

I leaned onto the bartop, a wooden and sticky slab, colored with the imprints of cups beyond counting.

When the music stopped, I leaned farther until I was up out of my stool and the woman bartender couldn’t help but notice me, there, obvious at the far end of the place with the easy silence of distance between us.

She glared with the hardness of someone who was now back in a tired, old scene, one from which work had leached away the mystery.

‘What do you need?’ she said.

‘Need?’ I said. ‘What do I need?’ That was too much. I had no idea how to respond to this.

She looked to the other woman. ‘Those guys never give a straight answer.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘I think I’d just like to lean here on your bar for a bit. If that’s okay.’

‘As long as you’re not bothering anyone,’ she said.

‘He can bother me,’ the other woman said.

I studied her then looked away. I could have gone anywhere, but there I stayed, not exactly waiting, but rather, trying to let a feeling build around me.

‘What you think of my girl here?’ the first woman said.

‘I haven’t seen her anywhere else,’ I said honestly.

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’ the first said.

‘It’s fine. He’s too polite for a straight answer,’ the other said. ‘He wants to get through the day without even a frown directed at him. He just wants one long, shiny smile. What’s your name, baby?’

It seemed clear I had to withdraw. I didn’t want to become known there.

Somewhere in the next hour, I was standing out front of my place, looking up at her shadow on the blinds until it shifted.

‘Jen,’ I called with hope. That divine enemy of mine. ‘Jennifer,’ I said.

Under blue skies cut apart by pink, I’ve looked for her, again and again, walking among the boardwalk rats as arc lamps click on and the water rushes beside me, vast, coursing toward the Gulf -- that distance which, regarded from any of the benches, eventually consumes me.

Jennifer, soon to be led down the sidewalk by a friend, footsteps sharp staccato cracks until the coupled echos dimmed. I could trace your simple route, follow behind. But there was violence in my heart, a burning, and besides, I’ve always favored cutting down blind alleys, old passages, those long neglected roads.

Bright Red Apples

She said they had to get going since it was her day off and time was wasting. He said he wasn't sure. He said he felt very tired. She left the room for a while. He slept. Around noon, she came back in and said, "Look at the day! How can you be so tired!" He said his back hurt. "That's cause you aren't working," she said. "You get all fragile when you don't move around." He got out of bed. "They're watching us, you know," he said. "Cameras are on the old kiln building out there." She said no one was watching, she loved him, and they had to go now. "Your son's waiting," she said.

"Happy birthday, Dad," Dillon said, sitting at the kitchen table with a sandwich. He could hear everything in the house from there. His father came over and mussed his hair.

The three went out to the family truck. Aunt Mason was stretched out on the lawn, staring up, her fingers laced behind her head. "It's about time," she said. She came over and wrapped one arm around Dillon's father. Her face, calm in the shade, had wrinkled now that she was in the sun. As she said, "Happy birthday, little brother," a few leaves fell from her back.

They all got in the truck. Dillon's mother drove and his father sat in the passenger seat, looking out his side window.

They went down the yellowing corridor of willows, the even spaced rows of houses, then the driver sped up beyond their neighborhood. Soon, they were curving through the mountains.

Dillon's mother pointed out birds and described their different calls while she drove. "That one makes a *yaw-yaw* sound," she said. "That one makes a *sree-sree* sound." And so on. Nobody was asking about the birds.

"Want to hear a funny story about your dad?" Aunt Mason asked.

"Yeah," Dillon said.

"No," Dillon's father said.

"Oh grow up, it's *way* in the past now," she said. She leaned toward Dillon.

"Your grandparents were gone and --"

"That doesn't matter," Dillon's father said.

"Look," Dillon's mother said. "An osprey. Did you know their bones are hollow?"

When they got to the fishing spot, Dillon's father said he'd meet them down at the river. He said for them to go down there. He said he needed just a minute. Just a birthday moment, he said.

They went down to the water without him and waited, skipping rocks.

They heard the truck start, then wheels on the gravel. The sound of its engine got quiet then quieter.

"I'll make a call," Aunt Mason said. She went up to the parking area.

Dillon and his mother went back to skipping rocks. When they heard a car, they walked back to the parking lot, everything warming as the land gained up from the riverbank.

A man stood waiting by a red sedan.

“This is my new friend, Jack,” Aunt Mason said.

Jack flicked up his chin.

He got in the driver’s seat and closed the door. “He’s a lot of fun,” Mason said. She got in the passenger seat, and Dillon and his mother got in the back. Dillon’s mother looked out the window and put a hand on his shoulder. After a few seconds, the hand dropped.

“I’m sick about all this,” Mason said. “I don’t know what to do with him. He used to be such a sweet boy.”

“Don’t a lot of people get like that?” Dillon said.

“Let’s just get home,” his mother said. She reached a ten dollar bill up to the front seat. “For gas,” she said.

“Oh, no need for that,” Mason said.

Jack took the money and put it in his pocket.

They went out the old gravel road, then onto the pavement, following the bends past the new houses, couched in the pine trees. At that time of day, sunlight and shade lay broken on the road.

Soon, they were on pavement, the driver going fast, passing cars on the left, and once on the shoulder.

“Easy,” Mason whispered. “That’s no example for the boy.”

“I’ll pull over if you keep that up,” Jack said.

Mason closed her eyes and leaned back. “Just saying.”

“Say less,” Jack said.

Dillon looked out the window. The river was there, sparkling beneath them. It curved out of sight, then it reappeared, now darker on the other side. It did this a few times, brightening and darkening, then it went one way and they went another. The willows and the houses and the mill were now before them.

The mill wasn’t a mill anymore. Many of its workers had gone somewhere else. Now, it housed paint, aluminum, wood chipping, and fertilizer businesses. But almost everyone who stayed -- including those laid off, including Dillon’s father -- still called it a mill, even though its operations had changed.

“Slow down,” Mason said. “This is their area.”

“Look at that truck,” Jack said.

“That’s our truck,” Dillon said. It was not at their house, and not exactly in a driveway. The rear wheels were in the road and Dillon’s fishing pole was sticking out of the bed.

“This is Ty’s house, isn’t it?” Mason asked.

It was all cracked in parts: porch, siding, roof, and windows. The blinds hung slanted and yellowish, and a rusted grill lay on its side near the driveway.

“Awful,” Jack said. “Just awful.”

“Hey, careful now,” Mason said. “Our passengers live around here, too.”

“You know,” Dillon’s mother said, “I’ve never actually been to this house.

Randy comes down here all the time to visit Ty. They worked at the mill together, you

see. I guess Ty still works there mixing fertilizer or something. Randy keeps saying Ty's gonna get him a job, but...oh, I don't know. I'm just not too sure if Ty's helping his nerves, you know."

"Of course I know, sweetie," Aunt Mason said. She was looking in the rear view mirror, flicking at her bangs.

In the yard, a boy about Dillon's age was holding a short two by four, looking up at something. He tossed the piece of wood up, retrieved it, then tossed it up again. Now, Dillon could see he was aiming for bright red apples up among the leaves. When the boy saw them, he ran around to the backyard.

"That's Wyatt," Dillon's mother said to someone.

"Where's Dad?" Dillon asked.

A woman was at the door now.

"Dear god, who is *that*?" the driver asked.

"Must be Ty's wife," Mason said.

"Where's her neck?"

Mason bit off a smile. "Hush," she said.

The woman was holding her elbows, leaning on the doorframe.

Dillon and his mother got out. "Well, we have to get back downtown," Mason said. "Call if you need anything." The red car drove away.

The woman was holding open the screen door. "I'm Raylene," she said as if she'd been expecting them. "Ty's my husband. You just missed Randy."

Dillon's mother put her arm around her son. "Where is he?"

"Oh, gosh, I don't know," Raylene said.

Dillon looked up at his mother. “You mean he isn’t here?”

“He was, darling. He was,” Raylene said. “But he said he had to go over to the mill. He was very -- serious. Ty tried to follow him, but --” She looked to Dillon’s mother. “Well, he t-h-r-e-t-e-n-e-d Ty.”

“Okay, okay,” Dillon’s mother said. “He has a bad day now and again, I guess.”

“It was a hairy thing, you know. Wyatt was right there.”

“Okay,” Dillon’s mother said. “Listen, may I use your restroom?”

“Please. Come in.”

Inside was dim. It held a close onion and popcorn smell. There wasn’t a lot to consider. Except for the smell, it was very much like Dillon’s own house down the street.

Dillon’s mother went into the bathroom. Right away, he heard the water rush.

Raylene gathered up Dillon so that his face was lost in her flesh. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay, baby.”

“I know,” Dillon said.

“Wyatt’s outside somewhere,” she said. “You two go to school together, right?” Dillon nodded. “Go see what he’s up to. He’s always up to something.”

Dillon went out the back door. It was important that he get out of the house.

Outside, Ty was smoking in a lawn chair, sitting next to another man. The man was wearing sunglasses and his right hand gripped a bloody paper towel. He was staring out where the long fenceline separated the backyards from the mill. It didn’t seem like he was looking for anything particular. Dillon wanted to see what his eyes were doing. It was hard to gauge the feeling without seeing his eyes.

“Hey, Dillon,” Ty said. The man in the sunglasses was looking at him now.

“That’s my boy, Wyatt, over by the apple tree. He’s gathering stuff for a pie.”

The sunglasses now faced Dillon. Dillon saw himself doubled in their glare.

“Don’t you realize your daddy’s gonna get hisself hurt?” the man said.

“Why don’t you go help Wyatt,” Ty said.

“I could have chased him down and taught him something, you know,” the other man said. “But I didn’t. I sat back down because I’m the type who understands order.”

“Go on, Dillon,” Ty said.

“He needs to understand,” the man said, his sunglasses still directed at Dillon.

“He needs to understand he got his daddy’s blood. Boy, you know what genetics is?”

“Go on,” Ty said.

Dillon went to the tree.

“Your Dad’s crazy,” Wyatt said.

“He’s just a paranoid,” Dillon said. “A lot of people get like that. Did he really threaten your dad?”

“He said not to follow him.” Wyatt said. “He said there’d be trouble for everyone since he was already being followed all the time.”

“Why was that man’s hand bleeding?”

“He tried to grab your dad, but your dad pushed him and he lost his balance and fell. I guess he put his hand on a root or something.” Wyatt chucked his piece of lumber high enough, but nothing else came back down. “My dad said he’d pay fifty cents per apple. Go back over there and grab a piece of wood. We’ll both knock em down. I’ll give you a cut. There’s at least ten dollars up there.”

Dillon looked into the backyard. His mother was there now, sitting on the steps below the back door. Dillon turned back. "I don't want to."

"All right, fine. Here." Wyatt handed Dillon the piece of wood. "No, no," he said. "You have to stand further back. Come over here to me. Good. Now throw it as hard as you can. Aim for those clouds."

"I don't even like apples," Dillon said.

"Just throw the fucker," Wyatt said. "It's for cash."

"They said they'd make pie."

"Fuck pie. There's never pie. All we eat is pizza and popcorn. Are you gonna throw or not?"

Dillon threw and knocked down some leaves then ran to fetch the piece of wood. "Do it again," Ty yelled. The men were laughing. Dillon had forgotten about them. He tried from the other side and a dark bird flew off somewhere. "Throw harder!" Dillon threw and grazed an apple. It wobbled, then went still.

"It's not working," Dillon said. He looked around. The adults were no longer outside. The truck was still there. "I'm going over to the mill."

"They'll arrest you like they did your dad."

"That was just once. And, it was a long time ago. Plus, they won't catch me. Plus, there's a hole in the fence and I'm faster than them. You'll see."

"Good luck. It'll be dark soon enough," Wyatt said.

Dillon walked toward the mill. Wyatt called after him, but Dillon didn't hear. With the later sun, long shadows pulled off the mill and the willows and the houses as everything cooled. A northern flicker shrieked nearby. It was not yet dark.

Further out, where he had been earlier, things were blurring. The sky glowed faintly blue, cutting out a boundary between it and the darker shapes of land and there was nothing out there for Dillon now.

When he got through the hole in the fence, he saw someone. Far off, over near the timber piles, a figure was writing on a clipboard. It was not his father. The man stopped, looked in his direction then wrote something down as though assessing Dillon and Dillon turned and ran back to the fence, then all the way back to the apple tree, his child's heart hammering, the leaves beneath him dark and blurred and crackling.

There were a few apples on the ground near Wyatt, who was still tossing the piece of wood, now in the porchlight's outer glow. The truck was gone. Dillon stepped toward the apples. "Get your own tree," Wyatt said. "Also, your mom and dad went home."

It was almost dark when Dillon got to his yard. He stepped gently on the fallen leaves, going toward the house. Lights were on inside. It was just him in the yard. He waited there a moment. Through the living room window, he saw his father, asleep on the couch. His mouth was slack, the rise and fall of his chest barely there. There, he looked like an older man. Then a noise from another room woke him, and there, in that brief moment before things went clear, he looked around, childlike, maybe with a wary interest in something there, maybe seeing all things strange and not yet ordered. Then he reached back and picked a feather from the pillow under his head and he held it to his lips and blew and jerked his head around, gently blowing, trying to keep the thing aloft. Then he gave up and went into another room, his imprint slowly rising off the couch.

A Job

It's not clear to me whether or not we are late for something, but we are positively zooming. The foreman, one of my brothers, a kind, simple man who listens to me and recently took pity and gave me a job, told me that a house burned halfway down last night. We got into his van and drove out across the road that spans the Industrial Canal, crossing a bascule bridge that parts and rises to allow barges to follow the freshwater course as it flows into the salty Gulf, abutted by levees. A pair of ducks paddled calmly below us, sending gentle ripples across the silvergray water, warping a reflected sky.

The morning's clouds drifted. They drifted and followed a soft wind in the direction of the Gulf, losing their early morning color as the sun pierced a gray wall at the horizon. Early risers came out of their dark doorways like animated corpses, and porchlights blinked off like tired eyes in advance of dreaming.

With my window down, I smell dew soaked garbage gaining heat. I smell the old water, filthy and stagnant in the pavement ruts. The neglected road lurches our ride, clinking our packed away tools. Another vehicle is stopped in the middle of the road and a line of cars has formed, slowed into traffic. The burgeoning day is now bright against my face. The foreman draws a palm across his forehead as we wait in the building heat.

As we pass by, the man outside the halted vehicle is clutching the sides of his head, shaking.

‘Should we stop?’ the foreman asks.

‘For what?’ I say.

Blue sky has filled the seams between the clouds and the wind cheerfully whistles through the small crack in my window as we speed up, building toward a howl as we enter more crumbling roads and brick and decay.

Mid morning, we arrive at the job site.

At the undamaged door, I greet a woman still in her robe. Behind her is a woman in a wheelchair and beside her -- I can see him through the blinds -- is a boy. He is unmoving, focused on the gaps between the blinds. He pulls some down with a finger and the woman looks his way. Slowly, the finger leaves the blinds and they straighten out.

As we begin our work, I sift a silver locket from the ashes. I sift the charred remains of a dress, bits of thick glass, and something with a tail.

“I hope you didn’t have a cat,” I say to the woman.

“I hate cats,” screams the woman in the wheelchair.

The woman tells me not to throw anything away.

We are putting everything into large black bags. We work like people harvesting a late summer crop, our hands soot dark and bleeding.

“Goddamnit,” I shouted, “this is awful.”

“What is?” said the foreman.

“Everything. I’m filthy and starving. And what do we get in return? Silence. They ought to be more thankful we’re here.”

At noon, the woman invites us into her home’s better half for a meal and I sit down to a plate of rice and beans and stale cornbread. I lower my face and eat in a shameful quiet, trying to chew with my tongue off the rotten food. Nobody speaks and I know we will never be forgiven for our discourtesy. I haven’t even washed my disgusting hands.

Afterwards, we sit on the porch and smoke cigarettes. The foreman and I listen to the woman talk about her year. The boy is inside, looking at a fitness magazine. His lips form words, but I can’t see if he’s reading.

“He’s trying to be a boxer,” she tells me, seeing that I am taken by the scene, his mumbling.

“Listen,” she says, “you’ve never lost someone close before. I can see it in your stare. Look there. Look across the street for me.”

She points a crooked finger toward a row of houses, repetitive, beige and dull. A sad flat clutter of a view. The foreman gets up, walks off to make a call.

“There’s a blood stain over there,” she says. “Do you know whose it is?”

My throat is closing up and I choke on my breath. The boy tugs on his beard as his grandmother demands him into the back room where a heavy sour odor lingers from our meal.

“Some boy, some thug, thought his brother was someone else. They shot him in the gut as he was bringing home a bag of sodas from the store around the corner. By the time I came over, he’d sat himself up and got one open. I brought the liquid to his mouth

and he drank. Then he said, 'Tell Quentin not to worry.' Then he died. We lost him just before the paramedics arrived. Pretty soon, I was telling my boy he was all right, that he was just hurt and resting. All right. They hoisted Charlie into the back and I'll always remember the sound of those doors slamming shut. Quentin just watched the lights spin away. And no matter what I tell him now, no matter how many times I say it, the fact is, you know, that he still thinks his brother's coming back. I can tell. Nothing can pull him from that window, you see. Not even a fire." Suddenly, she presses both hands over her mouth, as if holding in a last clean breath, then goes silent.

I stand up and walk to the van. The foreman comes back from his call and I tell him we have to go.

'Why?' he says. 'We haven't even finished.'

'You sure haven't,' the woman says.

'What are they going to do about all this if we leave?' the foreman says.

'How's it my problem that you have to rely on me?' I say. 'What risk do I owe you?'

'Is it really dangerous?' the foreman asks.

'It's fine now,' the woman says.

'Nothing's fine,' I say. 'We're not safe here. This whole area's gone to shit.'

What's here? Concrete, asphalt, rusted iron railings, old rotten homes, old piles of junk. And blood stains. And these people! What would you do if you grew up here? You'd fight your way out, too. You'd steal if it meant a day of decent living. But you don't and I don't, and we don't because we make our living off their wreckage. All these people,

all crumbling along with everything their grandparents built. Pack it up, Luke. Get us out of here. You'll thank me later.'

'What a mess,' she says, looking around. 'What a mess. I'll never be content here.'

'Ah, shut up,' I say, terrified of her spirit. 'You boy needs you.'

'He needs a different world,' she says. 'But I'll just have to teach him how to rely on nothing since we're here.'

Soon we are gone. Crossing back over the canal, the sun is still high over the dense clutter of homes and clean over the water, and as I face it, the tears clogging my eyelashes gleam until it's blinding.

We Can Make It Here

Outside the club, they stood together in the unavoidable neon glare, an obstacle to the passing horde.

‘I got used to you being away from all this,’ Riles said.

‘It’s all right,’ Anne said, ‘the work’s nothing new. It’s just a new spot.’

‘Yeah,’ Riles said.

‘I should be off at three.’

‘Yeah.’ He cracked his knuckles, gripping each finger and twisting. ‘What about Sade?’

‘Well, she’s with her daddy tonight. Neither needs to know.’

‘What about when she’s not with her daddy? What do we tell her then?’

‘This is not a big deal.’

‘Yeah,’ Riles said, ‘you’re probably right.’

‘I wish I could feel a tiny bit of sweetness in that.’ She leaned in and kissed his cheek. ‘You are looking once again,’ she said, ‘at Rayon. At least for tonight. At least

for a bit until our luck changes. Thanks for walking me here.' Riles stood there. 'Don't wait up,' she said, 'I'll take a cab home.' Now she turned. He watched her part the moving crowd and disappear into the club's dark, blaring interior, and he felt the air cool his face as he started toward the quieter end of the street.

Soon, Esplanade and its dim, tree-lined median stretched before him, and he gave himself a moment to sit on a bench and face the oak limb entanglement. A perfect asymmetry, arthritic and gnarled and growing exactly as it was supposed to. He stood up and went home to wait for three am.

But he didn't go directly home. He went to Beale's home, a tiny shotgun style place with kudzu dangling off the eaves. There was a long pause after he knocked on the door, then it opened a few inches.

'What, Riles?' Beale said.

'She's back at it.'

'Back at what? Is she smokin again?'

'No, Beale. She's dancing.'

'Dancing?' Riles nodded. 'You mean dancin?' Riles nodded. 'What happened?'

'I think she thought we needed more money.'

'Do you?'

'No. Well, I don't think so. I don't know.'

'She just wanted more?'

'I guess. I don't know. I told her it wouldn't be a problem to move if we needed. I'm sorry to bother you, but I just don't really know what to do right now.'

Beale pinched his lower lip and tugged at it. 'No,' he said. 'No, this is no good. No, this is bad.' He glanced over his shoulder. 'I don't think Sade should be around all that. At least not right now. This is strange. Anne seemed to be doing so well. I was worrying less. My heartburn was getting better. So much for that. So much for eating hot foods again. Hadn't she been working over at payroll for the Water Board?'

'Yeah. She said she didn't like it, though.'

'Why? What happened?'

'I don't know, Beale. She quit her job, then I got fired by some contractor for taking ten extra minutes for lunch. We've been pretty low. I'm trying to make sense of it all myself. It's like I'm back in something I just escaped. Only, I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention on my way out.'

'This is part of what I couldn't handle -- that feeling you get like its the drop on a roller coaster. Don't misunderstand, I believe she can get out of it, but --'

'Out of what?'

'That thing you escaped. She can get out before getting too far in. But, for right now, I think I'm just going to have to keep the little one here. I'm not the smartest guy, but I know the word unstable. I know what that means. It means your girl never knows which mother she's going to get. I do my best to keep away from that stuff. That's why we split. Sade stays here, for now. This is for her, not me. This is for my daughter, not anyone else. I hope you understand.'

'I hope Anne will, too. Listen, I'm sort of...well, I guess I'm at risk coming here, and --'

‘I heard this from a friend.’ Riles nodded. ‘Don’t worry.’ He got up and opened the door and Riles started down the stairs. ‘I appreciate you coming here,’ Beale said.

Riles stopped, but as he turned to say something, the door closed.

Riles came home. He went to the kitchen, kicked away a plastic building block and opened the refrigerator to wilted lettuce and jelly and a jar of old coffee. He closed the door, fixed a vodka and soda and sat down on the couch. He held the drink between both palms and looked toward the dark, open window. Soon, a long metallic shudder broke the calm. The train’s horn blared as it always did at this hour, and tonight he was pestered by its moan, vague but still coherent over the distance. By the time he was at the window, the train was going, casting off its dull repeating shunts, and it was a terrible sound, deep and jarring within his chest, deep as if it originated there, clamor on clamor. He got his palms on the sash and closed the window as the strange array of linked cars went past, rolling smoothly on their way to somewhere else.

Riles laid down on the couch and balanced the drink on his stomach. He looked up at the ceiling’s mold blooms and sighed as though annoyed to find them still there. He took a sip of his drink, put it on the floor, then closed his eyes.

He dreamt he was younger, younger and holding a hammer, driving a nail into a piece of wood that didn’t seem to have any solid depth, the nail just going farther and farther in. He came out of it to a series of knocks. He stood up.

‘That you, Rayon?’ he said behind the door. The locked knob clicked back and forth. He unlocked it, she came in and he stepped back. She dropped her purse on the

floor beside a stack of children's books, picked up his drink and finished it. She opened her mouth and pushed air out from the back of her throat.

'Wow,' she said, 'you use an eyedropper for the soda?'

'It helps me sleep.'

Anne went to the window and pulled up the sash. It was quiet outside. 'By the way, Rayon did okay tonight, thanks for asking.'

'How okay?'

'Just okay. She's hoping for a little more next time.' Riles sat down on the couch. Anne lit a candle on the table in front of him. Then she sat down beside him on the couch, curled both legs beneath her and leaned her head on his shoulder. He fell rapt into her talcum scent, something relentless and edged with cigarette smoke. Outside, he heard men, heard their loud guiltless laughter as they strolled past.

'So this manager,' she said, 'a big guy named Wallace, he says there's already this girl there who goes by Raven. Says she only works Fridays and Saturdays. She's known, he says. Wallace tells me there can't be a Rayon and a Raven working together. I tell him people from my last joint knew Rayon, wanted Rayon, requested Rayon, would come to his place for Rayon, then he brings me into the office. Brings me to Ollie, another manager. Ollie lays it flat, tells me it's another name or nothing. So here I am, sitting here with you, day one of the big change, or whatever it was supposed to be.'

'You quit?'

'No, I didn't quit. What do you mean, quit? I told him I'm coming back tomorrow as Sienna, and she's going take all of Raven's regulars.'

‘I guess if you approach it right, you can make whatever name you want to stick, stick.’

‘Sure, Riles. That’s it.’

Riles let his head fall back. He closed then opened his eyes.

‘What are you looking at? Is there a bug up there?’

‘No, there’s not a bug.’

‘That’s good. At least we don’t have bugs in here. That would really do me in.

When I was a little girl, just about Sadie’s age, I’d lie awake all night afraid the cockroaches and things would crawl into my mouth as soon as I drifted off, and --.’

‘There’s no bug.’

‘I know that. I was just telling you something.’

‘Well, I don’t want to hear about any bugs.’

‘What? You aren’t afraid of them, are you?’

Riles closed his eyes. ‘There’s already enough to worry about.’

‘What’s gotten into you?’ Riles kept his eyes closed. ‘Nevermind. Hand me my purse.’

Riles reached down and gave it to her. ‘This isn’t much, but it might cheer you up,’ Anne said. She picked open an envelope and took out a little fold of cash. ‘This is for me.’ She laid down two twenties on the table. ‘This is for you.’ She laid down one twenty. ‘And the rest is for Sadie.’ She put three or four bills down apart from the others. The stacks looked tidy, neat and parceled on the table, as if that were all it took to arrange things. ‘I’m getting her that bike, by the way. Monday. We’ll pick her up from Beale and go straight to that pawn shop on St. Claude.’

‘Monday? Oh, I don’t know...’

‘What do you mean you don’t know? That’s what we’re going to do. That’s the plan I’ve made for my daughter. Non-negotiable.’

‘Do you really think Sadie should be around for all this?’

‘All of what? What are you saying, Riles?’

‘Well...’

‘What, Riles?’

‘I ran into Beale.’

‘Okay.’ She looked at him. She studied him now as if trying to figure him out.

‘Well, what did he say?’

‘Not much.’

He breathed in her talcum scent once more. Memories of his old place, of his FEMA trailer, then Sadie’s bright, hard plastic toys in his meager front yard. They got under the wooden steps and into his barbecue grill and he tripped over them almost daily. Then Beale came back from a North Dakota oilfield and gave Anne some time to change her job. It had been a sort of happy time for them, for Anne and Riles at that time. Afternoons when Riles wasn’t working, they took sandwiches to the river and talked over each other’s plans. At night, they walked around and lingered in front of bars where musicians wailed with proud, adept grace. Now, here they were, gathered in a mildewed apartment, starting something over.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Anne said. ‘What happened with Beale?’

‘Nothing,’ Riles said. ‘We talked. Small talk, you know. I said you were doing well.’

‘Was Sade with him?’

‘Yeah.’

‘He had her down on Bourbon?’

‘No, it was down along Esplanade. That’s where I went.’

‘They were there at ten o’clock at night? That’s strange. This is all strange.

You’re acting strange. What’s going on here?’

‘Nothing. I’m just wondering how much this big change is going to affect her.

That’s all.’

‘Riles,’ she said. ‘What did you do?’

‘Beale said he wants to keep Sadie his way for a bit.’

‘What?’

‘I told him what you’re doing.’

Then she was up, going out the door, walking out. He followed behind into a clear night. She didn’t turn, didn’t say anything. He followed her through dim, rutted streets to the riverwalk. By now, he’d given up talking. He walked just behind her until she sat down on a bench and faced the river and the opposite shore, its lights scattered, trembling in the water.

Riles leaned forward, took her wrist and pulled, and she hit him in the nose. He let go and she dropped back onto the bench. Something went out of him then. Riles cupped his hands over his nose as tears blurred his vision. There was blood when he checked his palms.

‘I’ll decide when I stand up,’ she said.

Riles grinned.

He went to the slope and started down. It was rocky and uneven, risky walking. The river beat against old, isolated pilings where a dock once stood. It ran dark and rippled before him, scattering the lights that burned on the opposite shore.

‘What?’ she said. ‘Are you going to swim over? You’re going to escape me or something? You’re a free man, Riles, not a convict.’

He got to where water pooled in the gaps between the stones and he picked a large one and sat down for a long time with no plans of getting up. He brought his hands into the water to clean them. The water was cool, gently sloshing as he washed himself. There was nothing in his world, he thought, at least nothing right then that could satisfy him better. Anne said something else. Riles sat. He sat and the light began to change. She was still behind him. The grainy beginnings of morning seemed to renew his reason for being there, still, his back to the city and its people. He did not stand up once. He was lost in their home, lost in a memory of their first time walking in together. Then, the space was vast and empty and quiet. A pane of sunlight lay creased where the living room floor met a wall. He had stood there, facing it. She had pulled him in, their fingers laced, and dust motes went up as they entered. They reeled in the light and neither spoke. There seemed to be only that sun filled room, quiet and easy to think on. Riles sat back on his stone, alone at the river’s edge with that day trapped inside him. And there was nothing to do now, it seemed, but repeat its likeness. He took off his shoes and his socks and he placed them on a higher rock and Anne was still there, still behind him, wan in the early light, silent as he stepped into the early chill of the river, staring out, standing there until she joined him.

To Market

Luke in old work clothes sat beside his wares in the French Market on a Saturday.

Sunlight glared off shoe buckles, belt buckles, sequined dresses and rhinestoned jackets on the table beside him. It was hot. A person out too long could suffer heat stroke.

When it was cooler, you could sit and enjoy the air and the magnolia leaves across the street that caught the sun and the sounds of the market, the people going from task to task with their wares in tow.

He looked off toward the river, flowing and winking at him cruelly, and he remembered selling off his canoe the week prior.

‘Finest clothing south of ninety dollars,’ he called to no one in particular.

He wiped his face with an old bandana and looked away from the river.

Across the street, where a bar stood, a man opened the shutters of a window facing the market. He leaned on the sill for a moment then turned, leaving the window open.

Luke studied a narrow sidestreet that ended at a cracked stucco wall. Heat boiled the distance. His wife, on her way back from checking their mail, soon came around a corner, continuing in his direction, the wall rising to an empty blue behind her. She always went for the mail on slow days. There had been many slow days for them at the market.

She carried something whitish, a napkin it looked like, probably wiping off the traces of some expensive cafe pastry.

Not even a week prior, they’d been forced to empty out the space that, years before, both had made into a dress shop. A space he had gutted and framed and drywalled on his own. Luke believed this to be no time for pastry. He would be back to caulk and paint jobs after the weekend. Again and again, his wife was telling him that she was waiting to hear from a few promising leads.

She paused under a magnolia tree to put a bill of uncertain denomination to a slumped man’s hand. Luke watched the hand close around it, watched his wife pat the man’s shoulder then walk on.

‘Fine silk, fine cotton,’ he called hopelessly. ‘Buy now or regret it later.’

Now his wife was before him.

‘I’ve got some mail I think you’re going to like,’ she said.

‘What’d you give that drunk money for?’

She handed him the napkin, though now he saw it was an envelope adorned with a familiar slanted scrawl.

‘Teddy sent this,’ she said.

‘I can see that.’

‘He won some contest at that big event they put on.’

‘It’s a rodeo,’ Luke said. ‘A prison rodeo for prisoners.’

‘Just open it.’

Luke opened the envelope and thumbed along the ridges of tight packed cash. ‘I don’t want this,’ he said, putting it back in her hands.

‘It’s Teddy’s prize money. It’s for the both of us.’

‘I only see your name on the front.’

‘The letter said it was for us both.’

‘What letter?’

‘He just wanted to say what was going on in there.’

‘Why don’t you have it with you?’

‘Lukey,’ she said.

‘Well, I don’t want anything to do with his business. And I’m not sure it’s a good thing for you, either. And what’s he doing this for, anyway?’

‘He’s trying to pay me -- pay us back, dear.’

‘For what?’

‘I sent him some cash a while back. Not longer after he was convicted. Don’t yell. That man has been my friend since high school. He’s like family. Listen, the man

needs some sense of pride. This is clearly an important gesture for him. He's been through a lot. He says no one visits him. No one calls. He did something that must haunt him every day.' She stopped talking, looked down and ran a finger over the envelope. Luke started clicking his tongue then she continued. 'He did something most guys won't even witness in their lives. Something your average man just isn't willing to do. And he needs to feel a connection to the outside world. To someone who knows him. I just happen to be the last person he was with. That's all. Besides, it's pretty obvious we could use the cash.'

Luke allowed sweat to run down his face and neck.

'I know you sort of inherited this mess,' she said, 'but this is nothing to ignore. What can I do to make this easier for you?'

He looked back toward the river. 'Nothing,' he said.

'Nothing?'

'No things at all.'

'You can't ignore this, Lucas. You can't just sit here and ignore this.'

'Sure I can.' The water looked fine now, surging, colorful, always flowing. Very fine water indeed.

'Honestly, Luke,' she said, 'when you get like this, I start to think. And I can think some pretty nasty things.' Luke studied the river. 'I'm not all dresses and flowers, you know. On my walk over, I saw you here and I thought that's not the person I married. That's a guy who's really slowed down and I don't get it. Sometimes,' she said, 'sometimes I think maybe I'd prefer you three years ago on a drunk.'

Luke studied the river.

‘Are you listening to me?’

Luke studied the river and began to long for his canoe, for the bayou and gar and blue dragonflies among the duckweed.

Then he took up the envelope once more and pulled out a twenty dollar bill and put the rest back down. His wife scratched at her lower lip. Luke stood up and went across the street to the nearest bar and ordered a draught beer from the kind looking man behind the bar. The bartender whose name was not important drew a pint and didn’t cheat him with foam. He pulled a few brief last draughts to bring the pale amber liquid up near the rim, then he set it before Luke. ‘Thank you,’ Luke said. He was excited. He paid for it and left a three dollar tip. ‘Thank you,’ the barman said, giving him a brief, dignified nod. Luke drank right there, indoors, in the shade, looking out the open window in his wife’s direction. Somehow, there seemed to be a breeze, tepid but pleasant enough, flowing in exactly where he stood.

Soon, he was watching his wife use both arms to gather up a pile of their wares. She walked carefully, her pelvis out, her upper half slightly tipped back for balance against the load. She stuffed the clothing into the back of their station wagon, which, early that morning, he had parked along the curb. Road was now between them.

Luke quickly finished his beer. Rushing, the bubbles hurt his throat. Calm, even, terrible sunlight glared all over as he walked out to her.

‘What’s this about?’ he said to his wife.

She took a load of shoes to the car and came back.

Except for a few belts and the envelope, their table was now mostly bare. His wife stood there, smoothing out the envelope’s creases with her fingertips, the paper very

white on the beige table in the sun. She looked down at it as if a little lost, as if there was some bearing to gain from its being there.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I guess you can just take it all. I guess I don’t really care.’

Potential customers wandered around them. The idiotic steamboat organ crooned nearby. A cart clattered over a sidewalk rut.

‘I hate it out here anyway,’ Luke said. ‘It’s always too hot and we never sell anything.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It’s true enough,’ he said. ‘It’s true right now.’

‘It’s fine here,’ she said.

‘Oh, yeah, sure,’ he said, squinting at the lurid asphalt. ‘It’s fine. Fine, fine, fine, fine.’ He spat. ‘Your fine is awfully goddamned hot and miserable, you know. My fine puts up walls.’

‘Then put up your walls. I really don’t care. I’ll manage.’

She started to gather up the belts.

‘Listen, Kate, wait, hang on a minute. Listen, I think,’ Luke said, ‘I think I could maybe just use a river trip or something. That might be all.’

‘Then take one!’

She took up the envelope and stuffed it into the front of his jeans, behind the button.

‘Go. Use this. It’s from me and Teddy.’

Luke took out the envelope. She seemed to be waiting for something. He folded it and put it in his back pocket. There was enough in there for a canoe, he thought.

Now his wife was moving off toward the car. There was more force in her movement as he followed. It was obvious. Her feet hit the pavement louder. Now, it felt like he was fighting to regain whatever edge the beer had blunted. But his mouth felt sticky and dry as he tried to call her name, and nothing came out except a low groan. She got in the car and drove away. He could follow later if he decided. Home wasn't that far. Anyway, he was back to thinking on the bayou again, paddling slow, smooth ripples across the water from a new canoe. And that was something to preserve.

Across the road, where Luke was once again headed, the barman was holding an empty glass to the light, studying it for marks, working there beyond the market with the cool, serious care of a man who is steady in his tasks.

A Measure of Light

They were walking down the narrow space between the cathedral and the windowless side of an old stucco building. Sayles was carrying the staff, a long piece of wood with a metal candelabra fixed at one end, the end he -- and he alone -- was holding up, brightly lighting and densely shadowing the group. They were moving toward Jackson Square.

There were four of them. Mary and Sayles were cousins, and the other two were Mary's friends. They all wore bright white drappings. Will carried a pair of clave, which he brought together in seemingly random intervals, piercing through the others' solemn chanting with every click. Click. Click.

Sayles believed that fate, or perhaps a feeling of history, brought them to this place, assembled, a solemn-chanting procession. Mary had mentioned her friends were really excited to be there.

Will was one of these friends. He had come down from Mississippi to spend some time in a city where he knew people. None of his friends asked when he was planning on returning home, or leaving for somewhere else. For Will, this was just a stop between places. If he wanted to stay, Mary told him her uncle could get him work and a place to sleep. Neither the work -- the upkeep of a primitive restaurant -- nor the location -- across from a house vibrant with subtle transactions -- were strong appeals. A place to sleep was. Money was. Will said he'd maybe stick around for a bit. The uncle gave him a cot in a back room. He had no idea as to how many days staying encompassed. No one asked. The others about him seemed pleased, though. They had smiled when he told them he'd stick around for a bit. It was unclear to him why -- he had never spoken with most of them -- but it seemed as though part of it -- their smiling -- was the fact that he added another human body to their procession. He imagined the procession with fewer people. It was bad. The few people couldn't sustain it. The hollow guesswork of human activity was an even greater presence in a tiny procession than in one with many.

Leaving the narrow confines of the alleyway, their echoes receded and their chanting became much closer. Still, they were an assemblage, and their mass and the

light he carried brought the fortune tellers and bench-sitters out of their slumped lethargy. They, the procession, Sayles in particular with his candelabra, were considered.

Sayles had watched his father in similar proceedings. He had seen the man carry the candelabra and he had seen it close and he had seen it from across the square they now were entering. It used to matter less to him where he was, just that he was there.

As they passed alongside the tall iron gates of the main square -- in truth, they had only entered its perimeter, though everyone still called where they were a square -- Sayles considered his old vantage. For a moment, he was standing across the square as a younger man, watching the procession through doubled iron fences, and, for that moment, it seemed as though he was watching himself now through the wrong end of a telescope. All he could really discern were the flames, wavering. It made him wary of going further into his own head.

He gripped the staff tighter. It was there, in his hands. The others were about him.

Will watched him, the measured intention in his posture.

They left the square, crossing the street in front of cars, pedestrians, affected horse drawn carriages. They were considered by the masses in transit. Xavier sprinkled rum throughout the street. Mary scattered cornmeal. Will struck the claves louder.

Now they were going up a set of steps, now they were descending to an old pier. The river was close and the pier was empty. The old smell was there as well: riverair vaguely rotten, cooler and less confined. Sayles remembered it. Will remembered it too, but from different times.

He had once come down and chased rats about the rocks when he was younger. That was a different time. Now, his travel was no mere child's diversion. Surely not.

Sayles had stepped about the nearby rocks many times while his father and the others went through their blessings, all facing the river, the bank opposite, as though it were some vast and, therefore, profound distance. He remembered watching the ordered lights of the Steamboat Natchez pass by, hearing the vague drifting cries of jazz bands, and thinking to himself, 'Some day, I'll be the one performing.' His father was gone now.

They began to arrange themselves about the pier. The clave was still going, its high echoes zooming across the water.

'Mary,' Sayles said, 'move over here.' He pointed to his right. She went there. 'You,' he pointed to the one with the claves, 'over there.' He pointed to his left.

The one with the claves looked at him blankly. 'It's Will,' Mary said.

'Just-- Please go there,' Sayles said. He pointed left again. Will went there.

'Stop with the clave,' Sayles said. Will stopped.

Mary was beginning to scatter cornmeal.

'No, Mary,' Sayles said. 'Not yet.'

She stopped.

Sayles held the candelabra straight out before him.

'Okay, Mary,' he said. She scattered cornmeal.

Will clicked the clave.

'No, Will,' he said.

Will stopped.

Sayles began the chant he remembered his father beginning once the others were arranged about him. Will watched him, working his lips silently, then letting out an approximate sound, dissonant, perhaps half an octave higher.

Sayles stopped chanting. 'No, Will,' he said. He resumed chanting, lowering then elevating then lowering his candelabra. The water was colored and made less opaque by his candlelight. He glanced at Mary. There was a mound of cornmeal beginning to form in her section of the pier. 'No, Mary,' Sayles said. 'Too much.' She stopped.

There were voices behind them now. Sayles glanced over his shoulder. A few people were standing above them, watching. 'Will,' he said, 'continue.' Will began chanting again. 'No, goddamnit-- No, Will. The claves.' Will resumed his random striking.

Sayles went about his chanting, his waving of the candelabra. He could still hear the small crowd behind.

'Hey,' Mary whispered.

'What?' Sayles said through his teeth.

'Where's Xavier?'

'Who?'

'The guy with the rum.'

Sayles looked around. It was just the three of them on the pier.

'Sonofabitch,' Sayles said.

'There he is,' Will said above his clicking sounds. He stopped playing and pointed a clave up at a bench beneath a lamp on the levee above them. Xavier was sitting

there, sipping from the rum bottle, now passing it to a man wearing a heavy overcoat and stringy, tattered jeans. They were very clear and bluish there beneath the light.

Sayles's head ticked. 'Here,' he said, thrusting the candelabra at Mary. Mary took it. 'Don't let the candles go out.' He turned and it was very quiet behind him. He turned back. 'Well don't stop, Will. Mary, you saw what I was doing.'

'Yes.'

'So do it.' Sayles turned again, now hearing the clave clicking and Mary dimly chanting behind him.

He walked up the steps, past the small crowd, and stopped at the bench where Xavier was exchanging the bottle with another man. 'Hey,' Xavier said. 'This is Charlie.'

'It is,' Charlie said, 'a pleasure.' He held out an enormous curving catcher mitt of a hand flecked with dried blood and dirt.

'God--,' Sayles lowered his voice, 'goddamnit, Xavier. Don't you see what's going on? Don't you see you're ruining the whole thing?'

Charlie still had his hand extended.

Xavier began to pass the bottle to his friend and Sayles grabbed it. 'Hey,' Xavier said.

'That,' Charlie said, 'is not couth, man.'

Sayles smashed the bottle on the walkway.

'Woah now,' Xavier said.

'Not couth,' Charlie said, looking away.

Sayles heard the crowd beside them. Half were turned, facing them silently. The others were making little reverent noises and pointing at the pier. Now the full crowd looked. Sayles looked.

Down below, Will was waving the candelabra above his head, briefly streaking the emptiness with light.

Sayles made for the pier, slipping on broken glass and banging his knee on glass and cement, making a little red spot on his white draping. 'Motherfucker,' Sayles said. He got up and went down to the pier.

'Look,' Mary said, pointing across the water. 'There's somebody over there with a flashlight or something. Every time we wave the light --'

'Give that back to me,' Sayles said to Will.

'Hang on,' Will said. 'Look over there.'

Sayles didn't look. 'Will, give me the candelabra.'

Will started to, then stopped. 'No,' he said. 'You've had it all night, and I'm having fun, so you can wait.'

Sayles turned to Mary. 'How did he get a hold of it?' Mary shrugged.

Sayles went up to Will and grabbed the staff with one hand. 'Hey,' Will said.

'Let go,' Sayles said.

'Wait,' Will said.

'Both of you stop,' Mary said.

They didn't stop. They were both locked on the object, both their feet shuffling by the pier's edge.

The crowd above them made little excited noises.

‘Get him, Will,’ Xavier called from higher up.

Sayles kept his hands on the candelabra, reared back his head, then headbutted Will in the nose. Will let go of the staff. Blood seeped into white draping.

The crowd above them watched, silent, as though in anticipation of something.

‘Alright,’ Sayles said. ‘I’m here. Come fuck with me.’

Will went, gripping the staff once more.

‘Calm down,’ Mary said.

‘I don’t calm down,’ Sayles said. ‘This is my thing, and y’all were just invited.’

‘But you just heatbutted Will,’ Mary said. ‘You’re just a brutal pig.’

‘I’m no role model. I don’t have kids. I don’t give a fuck,’ Sayles said.

‘Somebody get the police,’ Mary yelled.

‘That’s right,’ Sayles said to Will, ‘I got you. I might go to jail, but I got you. Don’t give a fuck. No kids, don’t give a fuck.’

Will let go and Sayles hobbled back a few steps from his pulling, glancing down at the water as he steadied himself. Will took off his soiled draping and threw it in the water. He went up the steps with Mary and joined Xavier and Charlie and they all huddled around his bloody nose, examining it with delicate gestures and expressions of concern. They walked away.

The crowd dispersed.

Sayles looked out across the oilblack water. Movement on the opposite bank, random streaks of light. A pause. More wild, random movements.

He looked at his dead candles. He wanted a means of response. He tried waving the unlit staff. If you saw him there, he might seem distressed, desperate, wildly

thinking. If you saw him there, you might think he was trying to convey a message, making up his signals -- simple gestures -- as he went.

A few others glanced down in passing. No one saw him there fully, across the range of his conveyance.

They came up the levee in the early gray, their feet sliding every few steps. Neither was speaking. It was lightly raining and everything pattered around them.

The ground was unsaturated, still loose and dry, and it was difficult to gain a steady purchase. Both of Mary's feet slid out from under her and she went down firmly. She tipped her head back, letting the rain play against her face. With her eyes closed, it looked as though she might not rise.

'Come on,' Will said.

'No,' Mary said. 'I might just stay here. Maybe just until light.'

Will stepped about then picked up a spent bullet casing. 'Look,' he said. Mary looked, and Will waved the glinting remain and said: 'Good luck.'

Mary stood up and they stumbled up to easier ground.

Xavier was sitting by an old gray campfire with Charlie and a new bottle.

'This youth is wasted on the youth or whatever,' Xavier said.

'You fuckin-a,' Charlie said.

Will and Mary were standing by the path. The rain had stopped. The canal water looked black and oily in the dense blue calm of early morning. Oak trees, cattails and rushes stood up firmly, quietly now without the rain. Some measure of pink was expanding behind the clutter at the canal's other embankment.

‘Look,’ Mary said. ‘It’s lovely.’

Will was staring out through a confusion of trees and houses at the expanding sunlight. Xavier was leaning on his elbows. Charlie’s chin was dipping to his chest, popping up, dipping again.

‘Come on,’ Will said.

‘Let’s watch the sun rise,’ Mary said.

Will started walking.

‘I think we’ve learned not to play follow-the-quiet-leader,’ Xavier said.

‘You fuckin-a,’ Charlie said.

Will walked the path, following it toward the road. The path dropped to a set of fractured concrete steps and houses came into view, a few scattered windows glowing the yellow of cheap egg yolk. Mary came up behind him and they stood there a moment. The sun was rising harsh behind them. He could feel the moment contorting him into his own victim, a brief and paltry indulgence.

They came off the county road onto dirt and grass and Eugene's boy rolled down his window to feel the air. His little hand rode an invisible wave and his hair flew in all directions as they went toward the ranch house. Strange insects jumped away as the dead yellow grass hissed beneath the tires.

'This is way better than that stupid highway,' the boy said.

'Don't you talk that way about our state's infrastructure,' his father said. 'I pay taxes on that.'

'It's nothin but flat and gas stations,' the boy said.

His father leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel tighter, as if he might convey his anger to the car. Now, the ride was full of jolts that, as Eugene went over them, made his son go wide eyed then smile, his expression alternating fear and relief.

'Son, you put that winder up right now,' Eugene said. 'You're lettin out the air conditioning.'

The boy rolled his window to within half an inch of its seal. 'I hate the way in smells in here,' he said. 'Smells like a pet store.'

'Up means up,' his father said. 'This is a new car and I ain't havin dust and crickets and things fly in here.'

'You never said how far up,' his boy said. 'And this ain't new. It had a big sticker on it that said USED in bright yellow letters.' He rolled the window up some more, leaving a thin sliver of naked light.

Eugene stopped the car. 'You like the air? Go on, then, Ezra.' The doors clicked unlocked. 'Feel it all.'

Ezra got out and didn't close the door, and Eugene drove toward the house with the open door flapping. 'Let him see it,' he thought. 'Let it leave a mark on his conscience. Used car. It ain't got but a few thousand on it.' Eugene stopped, leaned way over and yanked the door shut, not checking behind him as he continued on.

Coming down the rutted dirt drive, he passed Nelson Creek, passed its dry, sandy bottom, and he tried to remember when water moved along its crooked path. Back then, he had long afternoons in sun and willow shade and the soft thicket hum of cicadas. He had walks with his father, his mother's cooking, the good feeling after fencework and the creek. Some days, he would go down and swim all day, drained of plans or other aims. The years had slowly wrought this place new, but to Eugene, it was just another click in a slideshow beyond his control, one scene trading another.

Eugene wanted to come here like a child again, to be thoughtless, to let his eyes do all the work. He used to trust in what he saw, used to let the land drive his mind. The rest had always seemed too soft. It seemed to crumple when he tried to feel it. His family talked often of their plans -- plans to move, plans to upgrade the ranch equipment -- but he never stuck around to wait for them to become anything real, anything seen. But now, with his mother just out of brain surgery and oil discovered on the land, he decided to come back, to cast his vote for letting the oil folk in, and if there was time, maybe feel his blood back on the land before it changed.

He parked away from the cluster of other cars, got out and looked for his boy.

Ezra was a tiny thing, a dark speck far out near the sendero. Eugene scooped the air toward himself as if to hurry the child along, but his boy had crouched down among a

patch of bluebonnets, wasting time. Eugene had to give a very important talk to the family and get his son back to his mother not long after dark.

He walked around to the side door and entered alone. Everything before him looked about the same. The TV was now bigger and flatter than he remembered, but all was arranged as he had known. He went down a narrow hall and gently opened his parent's bedroom door.

His mother was breathing in gentle rasps beneath a Welcome Home sign. He leaned over the bed. Her stitches seemed like they were barely holding, her skin taut around the gash, shiny as an egg in the lamplight. Her peroxidized hair was gone for now, giving her a sort of punked out look. Eugene could feel the years between them. Years since the sudden news of his fatherhood took him somewhere else. They spoke all at once, an awful din. He tried to focus on her breathing, but it came grating out.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘what the hell now?’

He glanced once more at the figure on the bed. Then he went out, followed the field's slope down toward the sendero, calling out his boy's name. At the fence, Eugene checked behind him and he saw the frenzy, the treacly clot of false pity and hope, and he walked on as if he were separate from it all. Following the fence line, he passed a pier that jutted into a grassy ditch where he used to catch fat perch. His boots stamped a vague path in the dead yellow grass as he came onto the sendero. In a few months, there would be a slurry blender right where he was, but for now, it was just a river of dead grass enclosed by thickets on either side. It rose up to a grade that used to be a uranium mine. And above was nothing but empty sky, a huge nothing on the horizon.

Further along, near the sendero's lower gradient, he saw the old, rotting Nelson house. As a child, he would go there to throw rocks at the buzzards who had made a roost of the decay. Maybe his boy had seen something worth visiting down there. He went toward it.

But only his father was sitting on the porch. His hands were on his thighs and he was looking toward the rise of land. Against the gray weathered wood, the older man seemed to glow.

'Didn't expect you to last long up there,' his father said.

'You were waiting for me?' Eugene said.

'No, boy, I've got cancer on my face. I've been inside too long and there's more shade down here. I'm supposed to avoid the sun, you see. You look like hell, by the way.' Eugene pulled a palm down his forehead and studied the oily sheen. His eyes were burning. 'Where's your little one?'

'I'm looking for him.'

'He'll turn up. Soon as he gets hungry, he'll be runnin for the house.'

Then a quiet settled between them so true, Eugene could hear the air whistle through his father's liquor puffed nose. Eugene tried closing his eyes as a child might to block out his fear, but all he saw then was thicket. A dense tangle.

'You smell that?' his father asked after a moment. Eugene breathed in a skunk-like odor and nodded. 'That's the chemicals they're usin over at the Johnson place. You'll see the gas flare over that hill there in a bit, once it gets a little darker.'

'That's an old uranium mine,' Eugene told him.

‘Oh, don’t teach me. We’re lookin at the same thing, and it looks like a goddamned hill. Anyway, there used to be nothing out there at night but pitch black. Now, well, you’ll see later. There’s just a dim glow right now.’

‘It ain’t never been worth more than a glance,’ Eugene said.

‘Maybe that’s just how you see it,’ his father said.

‘Maybe you should try seein it my way for once,’ Eugene said. ‘Maybe then, you’d see this ain’t nothin to be saved.’

‘Maybe,’ his father said. ‘Depends on what the family decides.’

‘One I get through with them, they’ll understand.’

‘Sit down. You’re makin me tired.’

Eugene sat down on the step beside him. His father thumbed snuff from his lower lip then spat a few brown gobs. Then he took up a coffee mug from beside him and his palsied hands shook a little liquid onto the ground, then his chin as he drank like a man at the altar.

But Eugene was not one to just sit around. He stood up and said, ‘You need to sort yourself out, old man.’ Then he began pacing.

‘Go find your boy,’ his father said. ‘Let’s hope he’s not gettin his face chewed off by a coyote.’

‘I’ve taught him things. He knows what to avoid.’

As he paced, Eugene noticed a pile of rusted barbed wire at the side of the house.

‘What a mess,’ he said. ‘Anybody manage this place anymore?’

‘I got cancer on my face,’ his father said. ‘And I’m having arthritis problems.’

He said other things, but Eugene began working on getting the wire into coils, which he stacked neatly along the concrete foundation. Ideas and plans left him as his blood heated, blooming a new feeling throughout his chest, arms and back. By the time he was done, he was too tired to teach his father anything more, so he decided to walk until he regained his focus. He wanted to be fully collected when he gave his talk.

As his blood cooled off, he began trying to think up a way of showing them that you can't just idle and hope yourself into something better. They just couldn't see the problem. He saw a great hunk of the world as being available to the ones who could stomach its changes. He saw nothing to be gained in keeping the land one way until they all up and died.

So he walked, down into the thicket, trying to get somewhere.

All was broken into pieces by the thicket: sky, earth and creekbed. His father was somewhere behind him now, calling out -- what? His name? His boy's name? He didn't wait, wouldn't return yet. A breeze nudged its sadness across his face. He went further until the voice behind him faded. It was dry as he neared the creekbed, the bank loose and crumbling under his awkward steps, a bad purchase underneath. Rocks stood out where water once was, altogether bold, a dark relief against the sand. He looked up at a fractured sky then continued over old sticks and dead leaves. Sunlight lay in shards all around him. It was all very dry and the ground made an awful racket as he walked. By now, the land was nearly alien, his old markers washed out, dried out and cleared, consumed by pests. He'd caught no changes in the act, though. But he was seeing more deer than he remembered. More hogs, too -- or, at least, strewn hints of their presence. Dirt piles -- the darkest earth he'd seen that day -- lay all around him, gouged out from

the hogs' rooting. Off the creekbed's other side now, getting out of the thicket, he saw the tractor house was gone, or rather, had been reduced to a splintered pile of lumber. And the air still had a bite to it, steeped in that skunklike odor his father mentioned. Nobody had followed him. Bleary and sweat-stained, Eugene sat down on grass and began to weep, still hostage to his old notions of calm, weeping only for himself. Then he stood up and returned.

The main house was in view again, and he saw something moving around in his car. When he got to it, he saw Ezra, sitting in the back seat with the door open, sweating as he picked petals off a bluebonnet. Eugene opened the driver's door and leaned in.

'You're dirty,' he said. 'And you're shoes are dirty. And you're messin up my carpet with all them petals.'

'I want to go,' Ezra said.

'We ain't goin nowhere. I got to sit down and talk to my family,' Eugene said.

Ezra got out and ran toward a group of children pushing and kicking at each other by an orange tree. Good, Eugene thought, he's busy and now I can check my notes. There was a small notepad in the glove compartment, which he took out and set on the roof of the car. He began going through each bullet point he had marked down the night before.

Then he came around the side of the house and faced the group of mostly strangers.

They shifted about the yard, and from where Eugene stood, they appeared featureless. It was as though the huddled mass had lost their color to the land, the grass bright around them, their faces shadowed grim. Sun was in his eyes.

‘There, there are a couple things I’d like to say that might, might give y’all a sense of things. I was born here. I grew up workin the land and I sometimes fought it, too. It’s usually nastiest to folk who try to work with it rather than for it, you see. If there’s one thing I know, it’s change, and this place is goin to keep changin, and if you can handle the changes it makes, you can handle the changes we make. Nobody should expect the same view all the time out here. Hell, I’d hope nobody would want that, either. You all know this is a special place to me, but it ain’t special in the way a picture’s special, keepin everything in place. I don’t think on it that way. If we let the picture change, we get somethin for ourselves, and if we don’t, well, we get more of the same. And that’s about the same to me as getting nothin. So, the way I see it, it’s a matter of somethin or nothin. Thank you.’

No one there said anything for a moment.

Then, his cousin, Callie, said, ‘Thanks Eugene, we’ll take that into consideration.’

Eugene turned, his face afire, and went back toward his car.

‘You ain’t been back more than an hour, and you already got your agenda on us.’

Callie had come up behind him.

‘No,’ Eugene said, facing her.

She smiled, shook her head. ‘Then what are you doin?’

‘I’m puttin some ideas on the table for everyone to consider.’

Callie shielded her eyes from the sun. ‘You’ve never been much more to us than a thin promise, Eugene. I hear you’re comin, then I hear you’re not, hear people say you

got kid stuff. Then I hear someone's sent you a check. And then there's just silence for too long.'

'Too long for you, maybe.'

'We're a whole lot simpler than you'd like to believe. It doesn't take much to win us over -- just a bit of follow through.'

'Well, goddamnit, I'm here, ain't I?'

'I see you there, Eugene.'

'Wait a minute,' he said, thrusting his head toward her, 'y'all tryin to spite me?'

'Come on.'

'Y'all are tryin to spite me. Shit, y'all don't believe in anything but yourselves. There's a lot more calm in everyone's future if we go through with this and you know it and you're just pretendin it's all about keepin things untouched so you can spite me.'

'Why would we do that?'

'To spite me, goddamnit. Y'all are tryin to spite me.'

He was pacing around beside his car now. His dirty hands were clenched at his sides, the blood from his cut dried in a thin dark line on his right arm. Callie turned the spigot back on. 'Come here, Eugene,' she said, 'let me see that cut.'

'I can wash my own goddamn self. You're probably tryin to catch me in some sort of incest, anyway. Run me off.'

'No such thing.'

A man he didn't recognize came out from behind the house. 'What's goin on over here?' he said.

‘Nothing, Jake’ Callie said, turning on the spigot at the side of the house. ‘We’re just talking.’

‘Are we related?’ Eugene asked the man. ‘I mean, are we blood?’

‘I’m this woman’s husband.’

‘You’re gonna have to do better than that. This is a blood matter.’

Jake gave Callie a long look. ‘It’s fine,’ she said, patting his chest with one hand, gently turning him with the other. ‘I’ll be over in just a minute.’ Her hand ran along his shoulder then trailed off his back as he walked behind the house again.

‘Come here, Eugene,’ Callie said. ‘Let me see that arm. I’m through talkin.’

He went to her and they knelt down on the dry earth and she pulled a napkin from her back pocket and held his wrist as she washed off the dried blood. The cut was just a tiny thing after that.

‘Tell you what,’ she said, ‘come back around when you’re ready and we’ll all just talk it through, okay?’

She walked off without waiting for him to respond.

He started toward her, but realized there were important matters he hadn’t covered earlier, matters he’d marked down, matters any sensible person ought to know. He went back to the car, took out his bullet points, and began pouring over them.

Then something came though the air, something that had no true shape, as he didn’t truly see it. He only felt it hit his eye. He hunched down in pain, cupping the injury in his palm. Through his good eye, he saw an orangegrays orb lying by his feet. He stood up, a hand still covering the hurt eye, trying to see his attackers. More of the objects came. As he ducked beneath the roof of his car, he saw a guerilla group of

children clustered near the orange tree, picking up and tossing old fruit, sun-hardened past rot. 'Y'all are gonna be very, very sorry if you break one of these windows,' he shouted. His hurt eye stung to hell and when he tried to open it, he only saw a red film. It blotted out the world and rilled down his cheek, and it welled as if from a spring. There must be a way of getting them to see ahead, he thought. There must be a way of getting them to dread their punishment. But the orbs kept coming, and in the car's shadow, they seemed to glow there at his feet like pieces of ore.

On Champagne

I was taught, growing up, that something had to occasion champagne. Some nights, if their friends were over late and the feeling was good -- which I understood to mean everyone was feeling loud -- my parents would set champagne out on the kitchen counter and have me do the opening. A few guests would come in and watch as I eased the pressure until the cork shot off, bouncing off the cabinets or the ceiling, or -- once -- cracking the window. Now, that pane has been replaced. Now, there are no longer guests coming over loud and late and easy. Every movement is an effort these days as they get older, though this means every arrival is something like an accomplishment -- whether it be to the grocery store or the bathroom down the hall.

My champagne days are just beginning. My girlfriend laughs easily and late into the night and has a small, well lit apartment near the park. We drink champagne all the time. 'Never a better occasion than dusk,' she'll say. From her place, you can only see the sunset pasted on the high rises, so we just toast the late day glow with our champagne and watch as it melts off the buildings. We drink champagne in plastic cups, coffee mugs, and glasses. No matter if it's usually the cheap stuff. We drink it straight from the

bottle before, after, and -- once -- during sex. We drink it on the apartment couch and on what we have termed, Our Park Bench. We are always feeling high.

Then, just last week, she comes back from the grocery store and I check her bag, and there is nothing in it but fruit and salad things, eggs and milk, some soaps. 'Enough,' she says. 'We need something new, a new thing.' We talk about moving. We talk about going on longer walks, maybe finding a new bench somewhere. 'It's almost November,' she says. 'That's no time to just be walking around then sitting.' I suggest we get on the El and see what we might be missing, and we go up, up onto the platform, waiting, looking down the long flat street. The deli has closed and men are on ladders taking off the sign. The autumn leaves on the planted maples are more orange since I last paid attention. Neither of us speaks. A few leaves fall. The day's gray is mangled by their limbs, now less adorned but still perfectly entangled. When the train arrives, we get on and ride out the gray afternoon. We ride and ride and get off at random stops, nothing around us but the height of buildings and that dim sky, and we pick the colors we want to ride, rather than the labels of their stops. We ride until we, at my insistence, get off by the conservatory's enormous dome. We go into the warmth and take off our coats and follow the wandering pathway. We walk through the plant life until everything I glance at through the windows -- those flat, gray rifts -- seems tinted green. We even go into the children's area and I take the slide down a few times. On my third go, I come up wrong and do something to my ankle. She seems disappointed in me. I don't know how to answer her silence. We follow the walkway once again until we, once again, reach the entrance. Only, on this occasion, she says: 'It's time.' She says she is going ahead to gather a few things, that I need to wait an hour before coming home -- 'back,' she

corrects herself. 'Really,' she says. 'Please wait.' She says she is going to be staying at her parent's for a few days while I figure out where to live. She leaves.

I've forgotten about my ankle, and, as I walk, I'm glad for the dull pain to resume, settled there like a testimony to something lively. I go back to wandering the verdant trough, slower, now limping just a bit, and soon -- I've been there awhile -- the misters come on, filling the air with sounds like we get from freshly poured champagne, when the fizz is still blooming up, just before it settles.

Seersucker

Then he lives worst, who, having been unjust, has no deliverance from injustice...who...succeeds in escaping rebuke or correction or punishment...who is afflicted with the worst of diseases and yet contrives not to pay the penalty to the physician for his sins against his constitution, and will not be cured, because, like a child, he is afraid of the pain of being burned or cut...not knowing how far more miserable a companion a diseased soul is than a diseased body...And hence they do all that they can to avoid punishment and to avoid being released from the greatest of evils; they provide themselves with money and friends, and cultivate to the utmost their powers of persuasion...

Plato, Punishment as Healing for the Soul

That's not for now, Tyrone. I have to keep my chilled lemonade sitting on my porch so the guests can have a cup as they walk in. You might say it's a tradition of mine. Nobody else does that, you know. I think it enriches my character to do so. In case

you're wondering why I'm standing out here, it's so I can become accustomed to the weathers. The body must endure what it is given, you see. Also, I'd shake your hand, but I'm on my way to greet and there's no time to wash away the sawdust. Oh, and blood? Oh, that's no good -- you ought to do something about that. Now remember, square columns -- not round. There's no Greek in my blood, far as I've been told. Strange people with their Parthenon and folded pita tacos. Did you know they built a mansion in their style some one hundred years ago not a quarter mile down the road? Did you know that it has become historic? Oh, but Tyrone, I'm not too interested in the historic right now. I like my columns fresh and sharp-edged, tapered towards the top. Don't forget to taper. You look stunning there in the sun, by the way, caked in sawdust and sun, but your lips look a little dry, a little hoary. And there's a shiny runnel bridging your nose and upper lip. Snot, you say? Oh no. Try the hose in the back, but leave the lemonade be, please, my friend. In fact, why don't you move your saw horses, etcetera to the back as well. That way you'll be free from all these guests. And my lemonade. It needs to be fresh and untouched for the guests: untainted by sawdust, etcetera. Well, I certainly do feel accustomed to the weathers now. You really must go now, Tyrone, and please don't shake my hand and would you mind closing the gate behind you? Tyrone, there's been a change. Rounded columns or I will literally die. Round wood colonial fluted -- that's what we're after. I've been exhibiting photos of the house before all the bad weathers and I said to myself: Those columns are round and perhaps we're all leashed and tugged at by the past and maybe this will appease. Also, the others spoke highly of its style. Start over if you have to, Tyrone. Find split round finger joint pine, or I will surely die. Get them tapered towards the top. Remember, don't touch the lemonade if you find yourself

out front for measurements. Certainly measure, though. A home makes a man, you might say, and you make the home, Tyrone. See how its all coming together? In case you're curious, here's the photo of how it was: see me there, leaning without compunction? A vain plexus flows my blood, Tyrone, I readily admit this to you, my eternal friend. My seen figure sparks a platonic chill down my spine when immortalized in photographic relief. Does this make any sense to you? I fear Ive become a little drunk. Now, I know it will be hard to undo the redone, but you must or I will have to exit you in all great haste. I mean, I'll have to let you go. You will be fired. Meaning, you will have to find another project for money. And I will have to wait another inch-growth of that garden over there for those columns to be completed. Let's not trip that ugly wire, Tyrone -- you see how brutal the future can be? Also, please don't touch the garden back here. It's a strictly visual thing, you see. Tended across generations, too. You see how we are guided by the past? So many deliberate labors to uphold. Gosh, you look heroic standing there, a little gaunter, though, with the shadows, and please do shut the gate behind me. Oh, Tyrone. Could you mind tuning down your carpentry? I know our music is quite audible from inside, but the great Professor Longhair and Mr Toussiant shouldnt have to compete with the ugly moan of saws. Just take it down maybe a notch or two and we'll all have ourselves a better time. We all deserve it. Longhair and Toussiant deserve it. We have worked for this better time and it shouldn't have to compete with offensive conditions. In fact, why don't you just take off early -- or is it late? Gosh, I can hardly tell in this dark and drunk. Do you carry a watch? See this? See mine? It is gold. It was bequeathed to me by my grandmother, who spent her last few years rocking in the rocking chair I have left on the porch near the lemonade, which

is nearly empty now. Well, grandmother would grip its arms as if to steady herself, though her feet kept pumping her back and forth, back and forth, and if she liked you, she'd nod in the direction of the lemonade pitcher. You were something special if you got the lemonade, I'll tell you what. It was like a club. Well, she did all this and carried on with the passersby in a grand olde fashion. I mean, she talked a lot all day. Yes sir, Tyrone, she left something to uphold, and I try as best I can. And it will all look so majestic fronted by rounded columns. Majestic like you look standing there fronted by the gate's shadow bars and moonlight. Why don't you knock off for the night and be back tomorrow sometime near sunup? And be careful going home -- I know it can be jungle-like walking around in dark, miscreants lingering in the shadows, behind bamboo thickets, etcetera. The old echoes of gun pops, etcetera dislodged from memory. In darkness, I find it difficult to exit my home and walk to my car. Within even that niggardly distance, I practically feel the cold sensation of gun metal pressed against my cheek. Good luck! Goodnight, etcetera. Oh, Tyrone. I'm not so sure about this morning. There is a pain boring through the back of my skull, and my gut seems to have turned upon itself and the carpentry noise simply will not do. I'm sorry not to invite you in, Tyrone, but you must understand, the house is a disaster and a few are still sleeping. Had to make my coffee in the bathroom so as not to disturb them. It's too bad you missed the party. These are important people, you know, recovering from acts of immodesty I simply refuse to recall. Professor Longhair and Mr Toussiant were inspirational, my friend. Sadly, now I only feel the aftermath. If only we could have our fun and later feel it too. You, however, look first-rate standing there, Tyrone, left-tilted with the weight of your toolbox. Makes me wish I could do your labors, Tyrone. Oh, but

your knuckles seem a good bit dry, and your nose is running. What hapless afflictions. You understand now why I haven't shaken your hand? I think tomorrow will be a better day, Tyrone. I'm so sorry not to have called, Tyrone. Perhaps you could stroll over to the historic Greek house for inspiration now that your day is unscheduled. What is it? You have a funny look. Oh, you've been? Your last name is Petrakis? Are you sure it's not pronounced Pe-trah-kis? How interesting. Stirs up my inner workings. I do love a surprising fact. Can I fix you a plate? Wait right there, I'm sure there are left-overs. No? No ham, no sliced fruit or chocolate covered marshmallows? Ah, you already ate. But did you eat like us? Our meals attract all the feral dogs, all the outdoor cats, etcetera. Scents to denude unknown pleasures. Have you ever put a duck in a chicken in a turkey and cooked it on low for thirteen hours? Have you ever put saffron in your butter? We do it right in here, Tyrone. Are you with me? I'd rip out my walls and live in an enormous kitchen if I could, but this place is historic, you know. Much to uphold, you know. And it's people like you who make history live on. Feel good, Tyrone. Thanks, Tyrone. Go off into this unzipped day. And here, take thirteen bucks for your time. I sure wish I could invite you in. No, really, take the thirteen, I must insist. Ah, you've made me spill my coffee on my robe. When the guests awake, I'll have to explain, I'll have to suffer their brown stain stares. Thanks, Tyrone. This was once a splendid robe, Tyrone. What's your explanation? You crossed a threshold, Tyrone -- you'll never work another day in my area. You'll never install another column. You're a fine specimen, Tyrone, but you lack proximate decorum. Learn some better manners, Tyrone. Learn to talk a little cheer and accept thirteen bucks. That was how they did it back when grandmother was rocking in her chair, and you joined the lemonade club if you did it

proper, and everyone else just walked on, alone, steeped in their darkly brooding flight.

That was the better time, Tyrone. Now you'd better go.

Oh, Tyrone, glad you came back. As you might have heard in my message, there was not much talk of the stain. Not much talk, Tyrone -- you are lucky. How one could not comment on such an ugly thing is beyond me. Oh, stop that staring and go on to the back now and resume your work. Time is passing. This isn't a moment for chit-chat or staring. This isn't a moment for lemonade. Also, we're back to square columns. We're going to have sharp, rigid lines running in vertical precision, tapering towards the top. I'd like it if you watered the garden, too. There will be a garden party here soon and I want things looking lush. I want a green hued calm spread beneath our feet just like grandmother's guests were used to. I want blossoms to harvest, natural beauties on my table. Such a sweet coital smell. It's about that time, Tyrone, when all is color and you forget about the darker time -- the winter, I mean. And meanwhile I must order a table and chairs, perhaps a decanter or two. Oh Tyrone, these were the heavy hitters, Tyrone. Oh, you should have seen us there, sitting without compunction, glancing now and again at the lush lush garden. I think you might have a talent for yards, Tyrone. And columns. All esteemed the columns. Is that because of your Greek? In addition to building fine columns, do the Greeks also tend lush lush yards? Why are you spitting so much? Is this a workman's habit? You can't bring it all to the forefront, Tyrone, spitting on my ground like that, spitting like a workman with a spitting habit. Why aren't you speaking? Thank you, it is a fine suit. Some duo we are -- you, standing in your solemn workman's pose, jawing with your employer from this canted angle, me, up here on the porch, defiling my previous decision, you, down there, summoned back in mercy. When I was younger, I

was mercied into some of my finest memories -- memories of celebrations, of meals, of sex. If you learn how to aptly return, you can shirk the future of its foul novelties. So why dont we make it a steady gig again? There is much for you to embrace in the natural world right here, gardening. Much to embrace. Look: there's a trowel and a watering can. My, what pleasure in the workman's toils. You will smell the sweet earthy spores as you release them, mingle your sweat with the flower blooms you help to grow. Oh, and Im sorry not to shake your hand to make it official, but this suit is fresh pressed and your hands, thick with cordial power as they are, have the grime about them, and I'll soon be leaving for a benefit, you see. Also, why is it that they seem to curve left -- my left, that is? Your hands, I mean. Perhaps a touch of arthritis? A man's hands are his own business, but let me recommend soaking raisins in gin and eating a handful a day. Grandmother's trick. Something to uphold. People like us make history live on, Tyrone. Okay, I'll just ease back to the front now and let you get to work and could you close the gate behind me? Tyrone, my brother is soon arriving, and everything must be in order. Did you do the touch-ups like I asked? Of course you did: look at those hands. Paint speckled, coursing blood at a workman's speed. They astonish me. And they will astonish Brother -- and he is not the easily astonished type, you know. Take the blue tape off now, Tyrone. Dont leave any behind, Tyrone. Find the wet spots and set a fan to them and if there isnt a fan, make us a sign, will you. Make it say Wet Paint in tasteful lettering. No, actually, I'll make the signs around here. You dont seem the sign-making type. Good, you've taken off the tape and made order of the scraps. Okay, but there is one thing Im going to have to ask of you, just one simple favor, Tyrone. Im going to need to reprimand you strongly. I will need to toss you out. You see, Tyrone, Brother

has a hold of this home, and he thinks you have been 'milking it', so to speak. I mean, he thinks I am allowing you to take your time. He thinks you're working extra long for money and want of toil and that I'm okay with such a thing. We all must toil in our daily labors, Tyrone. We all must suffer our energies' commands. I've seen you lift columns on your back, Tyrone, and your efforts knit their way into my memory. They become a history of faithful images, receding towards Grandmother, who laid the groundwork for us all. There is much to uphold, but, tonight, I must pretend to fire you. Brother is threatening to sell the place. Actually, I am going to fire you, but you will return again, only you may have to cut your hair and beard -- thick and dark and glinting as they are in the sun right now -- in case he returns unannounced. I'll hate to see you changed. You'll comply, though, I assume? Hard to beat working for me, you know. Oh, Tyrone, there is wet fucking paint that went unsigned. Didn't I tell you to put up clear written signs? Didn't I say to leave nothing unmarked? And, look, the colors don't match. Looks like a child got feverish with markers. Maybe they call you a workman because you create work for others. If it wasn't for my condition I'd do the whole thing myself -- yes, Brother, it's true, I'll tell you more later -- but I can't, and now I've wasted money I could put towards my condition paying you to watch unmatched paint dry. People at the party said they left lemonade untouched because of you, said they saw you spit by the pitcher. You wasted lemonade and you wasted paint on my fresh pressed jacket and you wasted my fresh pressed jacket and we're all wasting time watching you stand there. Go. Get. Out, Tyrone. Don't come back, Tyrone. You're through in my area. You'll never paint another house, never stand near my social lemonade. Oh, Tyrone, I'm glad you're back. Why did it take so long, and why are you looking so much at the ground? Shot? Your

cousin? Is that why you didnt pick up my messages? Is that why you are still untrimmed? Grief is a strangely comfortable bed, Tyrone. It is never worth lying down too long. Work, my man. Work for your brother's life and not its foreshortening. I'll check the local paper for a report while you tend the crawfish boil -- what a jack of all trades you are. Oh, and Im sorry not to offer you a conciliatory pat, but Ive noticed youre coughing, and, what with my imminent company and what with transference, you'll just have to have my words. Also, you must cut that hair, Tyrone. Brother may come back at any time. Did you see it? Did you see the crowd we had? My guests, all gathered around that bright red steaming pile, making order of the scraps in that shining silver bowl. Lights strung up across the width of my courtyard, the communication between inside and out. We kept all the doors open, Tyrone. And only once did a slacker try to wander in, hands thrust deep into his pockets, shifting his glances from one unknown face or feature to another. When we caught him he said he was trying to get back to Baton Rouge. Well, it ain't in here, I said. Gave him ten bucks and said, Try the bar down the street. They got pictures of LSU on the walls. Maybe after a few you'll start to feel like youre there. You ever just get a feeling for something, Tyrone? Pull the weeds, Tyrone. You can listen and pull weeds at the same time, can't you? Yes, Tyrone, sometimes there is just a feeling and very little in the way of fact. Sometimes you can talk to someone for a good two hours with an ever-brimming bourbon neat, then when you see them again, a feeling overcomes you that has nothing to do with something specific they said. You dont see them and think: My, that comment he made about the need to spend each day acting without misery was good, and so now I feel good around him because I tend to agree with such things. No. No, Tyrone, you look at him and you just get a little

swelling in your chest and you offer your pleasantries accordingly. The reasons come later if you think it through convincingly. Put the weeds in the weed bucket, Tyrone. Dont leave them on the ground: that's mere transference. They always grow back. But that feeling, Tyrone. How do I decide to be so pleasant with you each day, Tyrone? Do you think I wake up and say: Today, I will be pleasant to the half-Greek. Do you think I have time for behavior plans? No, Tyrone, troweling the ladybugs kills the ladybugs, and the ladybugs kill the aphids, and if youre going to trowel any creature, trowel the aphids - - squirrels too, if youre quick. Tyrone, I trust in my gut. I have a strong gut to brain communication, unfuzzed by what others say ought to be the case. Good, Tyrone, trowel another aphid. When I see these important people gathered in my garden, in my house, I hear much talk of what ought to be the case, of how things ought to proceed. Do you think I simply say to myself: Agree, feel good. Disagree, feel poorly. And so forth? No, I wander about gleaning what I can, watching for those elevated brows, those dimples in the cheeks, or maybe the long stare away, the speaking of words -- not talking, you see, not sharing a moment -- and, as time passes, I begin to internalize something of their characters, some feeling that, at first, doesnt link with words. Words come second to feeling, Tyrone. Always. Try the hose, Tyrone, your nose is running and your lips look dry and there is the grime about your hands. Such a beautiful thing, the light on the water, the water capturing a little bit of everything, splashing onto my grass that extends towards the three walls and house that surround us here in my space. Let's hold off tonight, Tyrone. The grass is green and the lemonade is fresh and my columns are proud round colonial fluted and the guests have already arrived and I havent seen an aphid in days. Brother might be here soon, too. Hurry on, Tyrone. Give it a little while, Tyrone.

I'll call. Dont be impatient. Impatience is merely a means of succumbing to external forces, Tyrone. Create your own patience through action, Tyrone. Off into this unzipped night, my friend. Time is passing, my friend. You dont want a history of waiting, do you now? Oh, and do ignore these long slender figures dancing behind me -- they are here due to their own willful enthusiasms. Dont look at this shifting lumpish mass huddled about them as the strobe light flickers their figures in and out of brightly adorned relief. Ignore the supplicating hands. Im sorry to have dragged you out here, having forgotten about this spectacle behind me. Dont worry, Tyrone, you'll be back soon enough. Oh, Tyrone, glad youre back. I honestly cant say I remember much of what I said to you last night, but I have a sense that you were here. And I sense that we parted on good terms? Ply your trade, Tyrone. Ply, ply, ply. The gutters need to be scraped out. The garden needs a hose. Whatever else you find, make it better. Oh, and sorry not to shake you hand, but I seem to have cut myself last night, and, as you can see, Im am bloody bandaged. Anything to report on your cousin? You need money for the funeral? Here, take a check. No, no, I insist. Believe me when I say I wish I could do more, Tyrone. Take this check, Tyrone. I will not stoop to pleading. Remember what happened last time? Didnt we both learn a lesson, Tyrone? Doesnt that mean anything to you now? Dont you see how a potential loss is worthy of remembering, Tyrone? Without Brother's threats, Id never have reconditioned this house, Tyrone, and you would never have gained a job, Tyrone, and so why cant you simply take the money? You have his memory to uphold, Tyrone. You must knit it into time. And you should be thankful for the money, thankful minus pride. Pride is a toxic fury that others suffer, reducing their aid into actions grimy, separate, and small. Id take you for this cancer if I didnt know you for

your labors, Tyrone. Take the check, Tyrone. Good. Tyrone, did you know I had a dream about you last night. I was walking down the street, that one right out there beyond the gate, and I was passing in and out of pools of light splattered down on the street from the streetlights up above, and I could see the streetlights through these tangled oak branch corridors, curling as if arranged so by the light, and as I kept walking I hung stars from the limbs of the trees and I felt tethered to the moon, and then you appeared, at the end of the block, and I heard music somewhere nearby, and you were talking to someone I felt was your friend, and when I woke up, I felt the presence of the dream still with me. I felt the strange presence of your dark and featureless friend. But, my friend, this was nothing but a simple rearrangement of old images. Plus, there has been more heat in the weathers. You should be more cautious in keeping yourself properly cooled. Fix the soffit, Tyrone. Caulk the seams. Cool heads calm strange dreams. Sometimes all you can do is put your head in the freezer, Tyrone. Sorry not to invite you into my freezer, Tyrone. The floors have been recently polished. Caulk, Tyrone. Did you see where the old satsuma tree used to stand? See how it is now a stump? I want a new one - - one new satsuma tree, that is -- and I want you to exhume the stump. Every land labor engenders a debt, Tyrone. The unspoken creditor awaits. And why don't we call this one a favor, hm? Why, you ask? I loaned you money, you remember. I freed up a respectful ceremony for your dead. Im sorry to be so blunt, Tyrone, but this is the state of things. Exhume the stump. Carefully. Once, I saw a neighbor back in Covington in the older time when I was younger fasten an axe into his boot. He was chopping roots from an unwanted bush. Fell backwards like in a dream. Seemed like he was still plummeting when I got up to him to ask what he needed. He said: Get it out. At least, that was what I

heard at first. So, I reached for the axe handle and he screamed and -- much clearer now -- said: Get. A. Towel. Blood was dripping out the back out his boot and I knock kneed, gagged, then ran. You might say I stumbled through my youth like this, gouging out freedoms of which I lost control. I ran quickly from troop to troop. There were no clear rules, you see -- no particular windows I wished to slyly exit. I stole candy in the afternoon and politely ate mashed potatoes and green beans at night with friends and their dapper Uptown parents. I only dipped into these waters though, never waiting around long enough for my skin to pucker. You had to keep rocks in your shoes for moments when you stood hard and still. Always a tac near your ass. My my the weathers have bloomed things bright. Here's a gin raisin canister, Tyrone. For your pains. Your hand, I mean. Do I seem erratic? Well, I must be honest, I suppose: This project will soon have to end. Yes, Tyrone, Brother is cutting it short. Such a disappointment, such a waste of your potential labors. He seems to think these are frivolous operations -- and yet he comes by, seems to enjoy himself amid my splendid columns and lush lush garden. Oh, Tyrone, it makes me sad like death. Take the canister, Tyrone. Gin and raisins for your fabulous weary hands. Grandmother's tried and trued recipe. Gather your things and walk proudly out the gate, Tyrone. Please don't forget to close it.

Thank you for meeting me here, Tyrone. I hope it's not too...much for you? That its decorum doesn't speak words you'd rather avoid? It seems as though I have grown rather hollow in your absence -- that nothing within my grasp has been able to adjust my mood. It also seems that my funds are depleting -- that I have depleted my funds -- so cocktail charges are all I can afford now. What will you have? Light beer? Of course.

What I mean, Tyrone, is that your choice suits your straightforwardness. Your unobtrusive interests. You, I mean. Still, a fallow tract of strong desire lies beneath us all. We must not be too temperate in our selections, else we live incompletely, in suppression, winnowing out our joys. A side of whiskey? Wonderful! Thank you sir. What an elegant man, Tyrone. He serves so well. Tell me: how are your new labors? Wait, don't tell me! No, this is not a time for labor talk. We can't have sawdust in our lemonade, if you know what I mean, Tyrone. There will be no shrillness in our pauses. The chaotic chatter all around us is plenty. Look at them: clean cut shambles, all cloistered for regarding, for transmitting a few distinguished jealousies. A bunch of ideals imperfectly realized, Tyrone. Everyone competing to say definitively what is good. How's your whiskey? Let me tell you a story: For a time, I was a teacher. Every morning before call, all school employees gathered in a circle and spoke in unison about our beliefs and love and other potent words. We spoke with conviction, and seemed to congratulate each other for doing so. How was it, then, that, one day, I was able to take a child around the corner of the building and shove him against the wall and jab my finger in his face, hollering without compunction? Calling him Little Boy? Calling him crazy and other potent words? Should this instance be forgotten? What, Tyrone? I meant: Is this a useful memory? Up until then, I had always tried to view my life in a series of flashbacks, as though the truths of my existence could be parceled out and regarded in epiphanies. For some reason, though, I had always found myself reaching back and creating epiphanies where none readily came. It was as though I believed this would make the present seem more reasonable. Reasonable! Can you believe that? And so with my mind becoming a little more unhitched, what followed from my time spent

teaching was the belief that my words were the voice of some greater purposer of time. And yet, at the end of the day, there was only me and the tiny room and the meager air around me. That day when I had to take that child around the corner, the end of the day when the children were gone and I was sitting at my desk, a swelling arose and soon was grasping at my throat. Thoughts of this breath being the final bore beyond the mettle. The gut turned upon itself. The usual course of movements was rare and altered and there was something sinister about the doorknob. I know, Tyrone, ridiculous in hindsight -- reaching back for that epiphany that doorknobs are not sinister, you know -- but this was true within the moment. Horror sank into the forefront and all became a pure unparceled duration boring into a certainty, a sense of the continuing loss of time, of my own time's end. A soundless pendulum swung between old moments, and nothing it conjured was sound except its own brief uncertainties. The blinking out of birthday candles, a game of tag in the dappled woods, standing before a bed in which a beautiful woman reposed. Maybe I'll be the exception to the end, I said -- saying, not acting it out -- never able to act it out, for the next moment was -- is -- only a possibility. The room's light glared horribly. Footsteps, children's laughter passed by outside. Step out, I told myself. Step out into a wider space wherein all is contained. Go into a moment which you origin, which you segment from others to your liking. And I went out and I just kept going, trying to keep my mind positive. Then you came along, Tyrone. I've often considered the first day when you showed up, shifty eyed and quiet in a way I decided was skeptical. I regarded you the same way I regarded my students: with a fearful withdrawal from my self-expression. There was much I felt I had to suppress. And I considered how we came to know one another, how we came to be sitting together at the

bars, etcetera, and it was through a series of epiphanies that arose through reflection -- I shouldn't worry so much about over-talking, but I should also not try to over-talk, etcetera -- that allowed me to move forward. But, what about the times when you fail? you ask. What about the times when human error shirks the epiphany lesson, leaving you on the finished end of a repeated mistake? What about times when you exempt yourself from the epiphany lesson due to passion or fear? Well, I have no answer. I think, Tyrone, all we can take from our histories is what brought us unabashed pride and what we tell ourselves we'll never do again, and after that, friend, we simply hope in our future selves.