Heart language

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HEART LANGUAGE

By

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THEY PAINT OUR PICTURES

With eyes that see
only Them.

Nigger!
Early September on Their playground:
Blond-haired second graders,
sun-burnished light brown,
Shout pictures.
Paint my son
with Their parents' brushes.

What are you anyway?
In a crowded high school corridor:
A great-granddaughter of slaves,
light brown stranger,
Places her hand along another's cheekbone,
Molding images.
Paints my daughter
with thoughtless strokes.

Fuckin' wannabe!
Brotherhood Days, Pine Ridge:
Young "full-bloods" passing by,
brave and afraid,
Mutter reflections.
Paint my teenaged friend
upon the Colonizers' canvas.

Who am I?
Morning before a mirror:
Shape-shifting visions,
shimmering in artificial light,
Whisper chaos
as
I paint my picture
through Their eyes.
Along the ridgetop, over from the house, Moon shines full and bright as he melts around limbs, gliding through the Standing People. Grandma's house sparkles. The smoke from her cookstove slowly curls into the night. I listen and hear familiar voices, comforting voices—but not Daddy's voice. I hear the flap-flap-rustle of wings and, beside Moon on the limb of the old hickory snag next to the barn, Screech Owl lands. Never blinking, his red eyes burn into me, seering the breath from my lungs. There is another sound. In the darkness now a shroud, it grows louder—Daddy groaning. He is still not on his feet and there is groaning.

Thirst 1952

Daddy and Delbert were thirsty that night. I don't know how many times the waitress came over to our booth. I was five and Momma had taught me to count to ten; it seemed like a lot more than that.

The evening was clear and still. In the sun's fading light, I watched the Smokey Mountains slowly change from
different kinds of greens to only a black line going up and
donw just below the moon and stars.

It was hot; they said it was unusually close and hot
for early September in our part of Tennessee. Even with all
the windows wide open, sweat kept rolling down our foreheads
and temples as we pulled off the road, bumped across the
small, pothole-filled parking lot, and skidded to a stop in
front of Piney's Place. Red dust clouded around us, then
slowly settled, adding to the heavy layer of dirt-red on the
log front of Piney's and on the bunches of cedars growing
along the lot's edges from both front corners of the low
building out to the road. Our dust-covered black car became
a mixed color I couldn't name. Grit covered us; it clung to
me, melting into sweat that became crusts at my temples and
wrists.

As we climbed out of the car, Delbert said, "Listen,
Kyle, don't bring up that Indian shit while we're in here,
okay. Remember what happened at the Hog's Head last month;
we barely got outta there in one piece."

"We are Indian," Daddy said.

"Do I look like an Indian? I ain't no goddamn Indian."

Delbert didn't look like me and Daddy. He had curly,
red hair, blue eyes, and skin that looked only bright pink
after a whole summer working in the sun.
Daddy looked kind of mad as he said, "We got the same grandma, right? And she was Cherokee, right?"

"Yeah, but ya don't have to broadcast it."

"I don't go around talkin' about it all the time," Daddy snapped.

"Yeah, but sometimes when ya get a few drinks in ya, that's all ya wanna talk about--like at the Hog's Head. Hell, it's like my momma always says, the race mixin' ain't done nothing but cause problems for the whole family. She says she never would've married Daddy if he'd looked Indian or, especially, if he'd called himself Indian. Ya need to let it go. There ain't no future for no coloreds in this country, whether they're niggers or Indians or what. And if ya'd keep yore damn mouth shut, nobody'd ever think about it 'cause they think Indians are dying out, and the few that 're left are all fenced in over on the other side of the mountains."

"Grandma Stokes was Cherokee. My Momma's Cherokee. And I'm Cherokee," Daddy said as he looked at me. I wondered if I was Cherokee too.

"Okay, don't save yoreself a bunch of heartache. But, at least, don't talk about it tonight, okay. Cocke County folks don't put up with no coloreds; they shoot 'em. And we got the boy with us tonight."
Daddy was quiet as we walked slowly from the car. A neon sign flickered on in the big window next to the open door. Delbert pointed at it and said, "Yeah, Pabst Bluuue Ribbon! That's whut I need."

Inside Piney's, it was only slightly brighter than it was outside. Along one wall, a counter lined with stools ran the length of the building. Booths stretched along the opposite wall. Rickety tables and beatup chairs filled the space between the two. Swirling up from the lips and fingers of men scattered around the room, thick smoke pressed against the ceiling. As we sat down in a booth, the drone of voices and glass clinking was broken by a loud voice from the back--"Fuckin' A"--followed by even louder laughter. A lone electric fan sat at one end of the counter moving the heat from side to side; inside Piney's was not any cooler than it was outside. So the beer must have tasted cold and good to them, though I couldn't see how they could stand that smell that made my nose and lip curl up and made my belly feel funny.

But I didn't care. I was sitting in the booth next to Daddy and his skin was brown and strong. His hair was as black as the lumps of coal that I would drop into Grandma's heating stove, slick, combed straight back with a small wave that swelled at his forehead and fell away across the top of his head. I wanted that wave to be on my head too. He was
wearing that shirt that I always liked to run my fingers over--the pale yellow chiffon-like, kind of see through. And he smelled of sweat and beer and Lucky Strikes.

I was sitting in the booth next to Daddy, against the wall, flipping the plates of song lists in the little juke box hanging on the wall over our table. Daddy showed me the place on the lists where he said the greatest singer that ever lived was singing the greatest song ever written--"I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." So Daddy and Delbert kept handing me nickels, telling me to play Hank's song again. All night long, they handed me nickels and I'd drop them in with a clink-clatter and push the button to hear the greatest song ever written. Again and again, over and over, "I hear the lonesome whippoorwill...."

I was sitting in the booth next to Daddy and he was buying me Dr. Peppers and little cellophane bags of peanuts without once saying you've had enough. Daddy and Delbert were real hot and thirsty. The waitress with the wet rings under her arms, pale skin, and smile of crooked teeth kept bringing them those cold glasses of beer with the white froth on top that slopped over the lip, trailed down the side, carrying the cold sweat of the glass with it. Sometimes, when I wasn't flipping the song lists or trying to get the last of the peanuts out of the bottom of a Dr. Pepper bottle, I would listen real close to what they were
saying. At times, they seemed pretty mad, talking about their goddamn boss, their goddamn cars, the goddamn government. But mostly they laughed, especially as the waitress they called Honey walked away and they talked about her ass, or when they used that word pussy.

But I didn't care. I was sitting in the booth next to Daddy, against the wall, full of Dr. Pepper and peanuts, tired, but fighting against the pull to sleep away the rest of a September night. But Daddy's voice and laughter, along with those of many others, became a comfortable hum. Hank sang on. Sweaty men came in, drank cold beer and left. I settled into my corner and slept until Daddy said, "C'mon son. Time to go home."

I followed behind Daddy and Delbert as they laughed their way to the car, then climbed into our '37 Buick and crawled across the front seat into the back. Delbert said he'd better drive and I laid down in the back seat, looking through the back window at the dark night and bright stars. I heard the scratch of a match and there was a flickering brightness inside the car; I watched Daddy cup the flame to the sizzling end of another Lucky. The car started and we pulled slowly out of the lot onto the highway. The gravel crunched and popped and again I slept.

Delbert shook me and said, "Yo're home boy." Daddy was already out of the car, holding on to a fence post, taking a
leak. I had to go too, so I peed on another fence post, then crawled between the strands of barbed wire into the pasture.

Though it was a bright night, the pasture field that ran side-goggling from the road up the side of a low ridge was mostly in darkness, held there by the heavily wooded ridge itself on the upper side and the towering stand of old oaks, hickories, and poplars below. But beyond this dark field, I could clearly see Grandma's house with its peeling, white paint sitting atop the ridge, almost shining in the moonlight. One window burned dimly--somebody was still up and I was glad.

With a foot and a hand, Delbert splayed two strands of wire and said, "Let's go Kyle." Daddy, his pants still unzipped, let go of the fence post and stumbled over to Delbert. "Goddammit, yo're drunk!" Delbert laughed and Daddy kind of laughed. But he couldn't lift up one leg long enough to step through the fence.

"Kyle, goddammit, let's go. Get yore ass through there."

Daddy finally got one leg through, but seemed stuck there, half-in/half-out, bent over and trembling.

"Shit!" Delbert said. Then, with his free hand, he shoved Daddy hard. Daddy's shirt that I loved snagged on a barb and ripped as he tumbled into the field. Delbert swung unsteadily through the wire and helped Daddy to his feet.
"Yo’re almost home. You can make it," Delbert said as he held Daddy's armpit and Daddy swayed like a creek willow in a breeze.

With Delbert's help, Daddy took three or four steps then mumbled, "Sick." Delbert couldn't keep him up, Daddy fell to his hands and knees and began to puke. He puked a lot, until there was nothing coming up; but still he was on his hands and knees just going "Aaaugh. Aaaugh."

Delbert tried to pull him back to his feet. "Goddammit, c'mon Kyle. Ya gotta get yore ass up," Delbert said as he pulled hard against the dead weight.

"Fuck ya," Daddy said. Then, with a groan, he collapsed to the ground, his hands and arms under his body, the side of his brown face mashing against the browning grass.

Delbert was still trying to pull Daddy to his feet. I went over and pulled hard too, but Daddy just groaned. I couldn't get Daddy on his feet.

"Go get yore Momma."

So I started up the ridge by myself, moving as fast as I could and still avoid the cow piles, looking into the deep woods on both sides and wondering. There was no silence; voices were all around, talking to one another, speaking to me. But I wasn't afraid because I remembered what Grandma had told me about our relatives in the forests. Squirrel
barked, Cricket sang, Whippoorwill spoke, Wind whispered--

Was that my name?

I stopped in my tracks, then turned slowly, completing a circle. But I didn't see anybody. Listening hard, I could hear my relatives continuing their conversations. I wished it was like it used to be; I wished I could understand their words. But they spoke in their languages and I didn't hear my name. Movement along the ridgetop caught my eye and I stood for long moments watching the tops of huge trees brush back and forth among the stars.

Then I heard Daddy yell something in that funny voice he was talking in and Delbert hollered, "Goddammit! Shit!"

Turning toward the house, I took two quick steps before I heard it. Wind moved through the trees, across the field, cool and easy over my face he called my name. Breathless, I stood stockstill. My eyes blinked hard and quick. The trees swayed, then the grass bent toward me like a ribbon unrolling from the treeline and Wind whispered my name--"Will." Barely breathing, I didn't move. I listened hard for a long time before I choked out, "Yes." But only relatives speaking their languages answered until I heard another loud groan from Daddy.

As I reached the house, I started hollering for Momma. By the time I ran onto the porch, she was standing there, waiting.
"Delbert said for me to come get you. Daddy's real sick and throwin' up. He's lyin' on the ground. He can't get up."

Momma didn't say anything at first, but I noticed how her eyes changed and her forehead wrinkled. "Stay here," she said quietly as she started off the porch.

I wanted to go with her, but could only watch as she disappeared into the darkness. Shortly, I thought I could hear her voice and Delbert's voice rising from the bottom of the ridge, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I stayed on the porch, leaning against the railing, straining to see, straining to hear. But all I could see in the field was darkness and the only thing I could hear clearly was Daddy groaning.

Daddy's old dog, Tick, that he always said was like us--half mongrel and half Heinz 57--got up slowly from his place next to the door. He walked over and pushed his nose into my hand. As I scratched his head, the battered screen door screeched and Grandma walked across the porch to my side. Both of us watched the darkness down the ridge as she placed her hand on my shoulder and said, "Tick an' me's old. We gotta get our sleep. An' yo' re purty young, so ya need yore sleep too. Let's go to bed. Yore momma'll take care o' Daddy."

In the kitchen, Grandma poured water from the bucket into a pan. As she washed my face and arms and legs in the
clear water from the pump out behind the house, she told a story.

"I wuz just about yore size. Momma an' Daddy--yore great-grandma an' great-grandpa--took us all down to the garden. While they wuz workin' the garden along with my two oldest sisters, Esther an' Peg, an' Joe, a cousin who lived with us, Momma told yore Aunt Evelyn an' her friend, Sally, to keep a close eye on me 'cause the garden wuz real close to Two Otter Creek."

At first, I only half-listened; I was listening to hear Momma and Daddy stumbling up the porch steps.

"There wuz that narrow strip o' sweetgums an' sassafras, then the big blackberry patch where we'd go pickin' ever July, an' then right along the banks lived willows an' huge, old sycamores."

She interrupted her story to tell me to look up so she could wash the necklace of black beads from my neck. I squinted in the harsh light of the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. My head tilted a little to the side, watching the front room, hoping to see Daddy tumble onto the old couch. But Grandma kept lifting the rag dripping cool water to my face, arms, legs, and the story went on.

"When I got a little older, I used to love to lay under them sycamores, using a root fer a pillar, an' look up that trunk that seemed like the thinnest sheets of white an' gray
paper rolled together but still strong enough to stretch all the way to the sky. I'd look up through them big broad leaves watchin' white clouds that looked like wads a' cotton scrapin' across them highest leaves. An' sometimes them leaves'd move, like those clouds wuz ticklin' 'em. Ya ever do that?--Lay under some old sycamore 'r maple watchin' 'em play with the sky?"

Grandma didn't wait for an answer. The waters of Two Otter Creek from a long ago June dripped from my chin and elbows and squished between my toes.

"Evelyn an' Sally weren't but three years older 'n me an' pretty soon they got real busy playin' with the new dolls Momma had made fer 'em, leavin' me out 'cause I wuz too little they said. I seen a butterfly, bright yeller like the sun an' trimmed in black. Big an' beautiful, she lit on one o' the blackberry blooms close to where the path cut through. I wanted to see her up close. But as soon as I got to the edge o' the briars, she took off. I folleder her, thinkin' she'd land soon. But she musta had something important to do 'cause she just flew faster."

"I wuz runnin' after her an' jumped on top a' a big sycamore layin' across the path. As my feet hit that old trunk, seven big black snakes raised up right in front a' me, waverin' back an' forth like they's havin' trouble stayin' up in that little breeze. All of 'em had their
mouths open an' their teeth wuz real shiny. An' it seemed like they's takin' turns flickin' their tongues at me. I screamed loud; I couldn't make a word, just one loud scream. Then the snake in the middle closed his mouth an' Smiled. 'Little One, don't be afraid,' he said. 'We come here only to keep ya safe.'"

"I couldn't say anything. I just stood there an' I reckon my mouth wuz open wider than their's."

My mouth was hanging wide open. As she swabbed the cool rag back and forth over my chest and belly, Grandma seemed to be looking at something over my shoulder, something far away; in her dark eyes, I could see seven black snakes dancing.

"Then, all of 'em closed their mouths an' smiled real big. Joe wuz only twelve, but he always wuz a fast runner. I don't believe he ever lost no race. So, he beat everybody else to me. As Joe come runnin' up, the snakes dropped down an' begun to head for their home. Joe grabbed up a stick an' took a swack at one o' 'em, but missed. Chasin' along after this one snake, who wuz tryin' his best to get away home, Joe raised that stick to take another lick at him. But just then, Momma got there an' retch over Joe's head an' held that stick. 'Ya don't wanna do that,' she said. 'These fellers just saved yore sister's life.'"
Grandma took my hand, leading me slowly to the bedroom, talking as we walked. "Momma retched over an' picked me up. 'Looky here,' she said as she tucked me up under one arm. She carried me just a few feet an' laid her other shoulder on a big sycamore that wuz leanin' over. I looked down an' there wuz the bank a' the creek droppin' straight off 'bout six feet to a deep pool. 'See Joe, I'm thankin' them fellers 'cause a few more feet an' this little girl wouldda been down there.'"

Grandma put me to bed on the floor at the foot of Daddy and Momma's bed. She knelt down slowly and kissed me goodnight, comforting with her smell of wood smoke and snuff and my name whispered among other words that I couldn't understand.

Sleep quickly began to draw me under, but I struggled against it. I wanted Daddy to be on his feet. I wanted to hear them walking up to the house. I could hear Lilly, my little sister, on her pallet a few feet away, making those baby sleeping sounds. I strained to make out the sounds coming through the open window. My relatives carried on with their nighttime traditions; but I could hear nothing of Daddy or Momma talking, only Daddy still groaning. Daddy groaning.
By May of my second grade year, I could count quite a bit higher. But, I still couldn't count high enough to number the emptied beer bottles and drunken arguments that filled Grandma's house.

One day after school, Lilly and me were swinging across the creek on our grapevine in the woods up behind the house, chasing crawdads and minnows, resting on our backs watching clouds skim the treetops. We were leading a wagon train through Indian country when we saw Daddy walking up the hill to the house. We raced for the house, hollering "Daddy, Daddy!" at the top of our lungs. Reaching the porch just as he was walking across it, we ran to him, "Daddy, Daddy." But he didn't seem to see us; he walked on in the house with us traipsing after him.

Daddy was all sweaty, and he smelled bad and looked funny. He was painting houses, so dots and splotches of different colors speckled his face, his arms, his clothes.

He went straight to the bedroom that the four of us shared. Momma was in the bedroom. She looked up from folding clothes and said, "Hi, Kyle. How was your day?" But Daddy didn't say anything to her either. He picked up some clean clothes and went out on the back porch to wash up.
In a minute, he yelled at Momma, "Dorothy, go get me some damn water. Everbody knows how to use it up, but nobody knows how to bring it in."

Lilly and I were in the living room playing War with a dog-earred deck of cards when Daddy came back in the house. I could see Daddy stop in the middle of the kitchen as he lit a cigarette. His face had a scary, mad look, a look that I didn't understand, but which seemed to come over him more and more often. I didn't understand it, but I could see it clearly, especially in his eyes because they became black slits that looked like narrow openings into a cave.

I looked away when Lilly said, "Will, c'mon, it's your turn." Then, we heard a crash, followed by Daddy yelling. "Goddammit! Who in the fuck keeps puttin' ever goddamn thing in the icebox in front o' my beer?"

Lilly and I ran to the kitchen door. Momma and Grandma were already in the kitchen. Momma was on her knees in front of the icebox where there was a broken bowl and a big pile of mashed potatoes. Momma started cleaning up the mess, and Grandma said, "Now, Kyle, there's no harm done."

"No harm done, my ass! I'm tired o' all this goddamn shit! I'm tired o' this fuckin' place, and I'm sick o' that piss-ant job! I oughtta just get the hell outta here."

Lilly started crying, and I felt like crying.
Momma got up, walked over to Daddy, laid her hand on his arm, and said, "Kyle, settle down. Let's let Grandma take the kids for a walk and we can talk."

"The hell with this," Daddy said as he pulled his arm away from Momma. "I don't need this shit. I can do better than this."

"Do better than what? What are ya talkin' about?" Momma asked.

"Fuck it! I'm gettin' the hell outta here."

Momma grabbed Daddy's arm again, but he jerked away and yelled, "Goddammit, let go o' me!"

He stormed out of the kitchen, almost running over me and Lilly. He went straight to our bedroom, pulled his old seabag from under the bed, and started throwing his clothes in it. Momma followed him and asked him what he thought he was doing.

"I told ya. This is the end o' this bullshit. I'm gettin' the hell outta here."

Now, both Lilly and me were crying hard. "Daddy, please don't go," I cried.

Daddy went out on the back porch, came back with his shaving stuff and threw it in the bag.

Grandma came to the bedroom door. "Son, whatever the problem is can be worked out. There's no reason fer ya to do this, Kyle."
"Goddammit! I've had enough o' this I told ya!" he said as he turned to face Grandma. Then his face seemed to change; as he looked at Grandma, the mad look seemed to melt away like I'd seen dustings of snow do so often on late-Fall mornings. And he looked sad--real sad. "I've had enough o' this," he said quietly, "I've had enough o' this. Oh Momma, can't anybody see it?"

"Kyle, if ya leave now, there's no comin' back," Momma said.

Daddy picked up his bag and threw it over his shoulder. I grabbed him around the shin, held on as tightly as I could, "Daddy, please don't go. Please don't go."

Daddy didn't say anything to me. He didn't even look at me. He didn't say anything else to anybody. He turned and, as he turned, he jerked his leg away from me, busting my lip with his heel as he did. Then, he was out of the house, gone. I ran out on the porch, whispering another time, "Daddy."

I watched him walk down the hill across the pasture, then turn up the gravel road toward town. He was walking fast; his seabag, half-filled with all his things, bounced up and down on his back, and little clouds of dust puffed away from his heels. He didn't look back. With snot running down my bloodied lip into my mouth, eyes so puffy they hurt,
and an ache in my stomach, I watched as Daddy walked up the rise and disappeared around the curve. He never looked back.
Interludes

He went away and I went on to school where, with each passing year, they taught me to count higher. They taught me how years stack so neatly and cleanly upon one another, somehow adding up to decades, to distance.

But always, I listened for him, thirsting for the occasional rumor passed from one family member to another that told of sawmills and construction sites, another jail, another mental hospital, and alcohol--always alcohol. In the frost of my breath on a winter morning or in the waves of heat shimmering around me in a summer cornfield, I might see his face, hear his voice, his laugh. The years passed, my father and I in places distant and imagined. So many seasons passed that his departure seemed timeless, that the man himself seemed only a story once told. Somewhere along that spiral my father became snippets of vivid images tumbling in my handsome stories of fathers and sons. Seasons spiraled in unbroken succession, only the earth providing trustworthy images of life.
Momma said Uncle Houston had called. I could see the apprehension on her face as she repeated my uncle's words: the new medication Kyle was taking seemed to be working, so the state hospital was giving him another try at making it on the outside. He was staying up at Grandma's, had been up there about four months and would love to see his kids.

"It's up to you two," she said. "Do you wanna see your dad?"

I replied hesitantly, "Sure."

"I dunno. What do you think?" Lilly asked.

"Well, I think even though we're divorced and even though he's been sick a long time, he'll always be your father."

So, after several years without any of us having seen him, Momma drove my ten year old sister, Lilly, and me up to our Grandma's, to see this man called father.

Sitting on Grandma's porch with Grandma and Uncle Houston, Dad smiled broadly as we walked up. With what felt to me like a great deal of warmth, he said, "Hi, kids." But then he didn't have anything else to say.

Lilly and I sat silently on the porch steps as Grandma sat in her rocker and the other adults sat in straight-back, cane-bottomed chairs. Momma and Uncle Houston talked about a
lot of different things—even at thirteen, I knew it was "small talk" to cover the silence and pain. Grandma said very little. For a long time, Dad didn’t say anything; he stared at Momma, watching her every movement, seeming to absorb her every word.

Dad finally spoke, talking to Momma, "Dorothy, ya know I built myself a house. Ya wanna see it?"

Momma sounded surprised, "You did?"

"Yeah," Uncle Houston said, "Kyle built hisself a place over on that little flat on the backside of the ridge. Ya know, just on the yonder side o' the ridge from the church."

Again, Dad asked Momma, "Ya wanna see it?"

"Thanks for askin', but I don't feel like walkin' way over there in this heat."

Dad looked disappointed, but brightened up again when Uncle Houston said, "Kyle, maybe the kids'd like to see yore place."

"Would ya?," Dad asked.

Lilly and I both said, "Yes sir."

We followed behind Dad, past the barn, along the ridgetop. The sweat rolled off of all of us as we walked the narrow, newly worn path through dry, knee-high grass and blackberry briars. About two hundred yards beyond the barn, we turned down the backside of the ridge, angling down to the short shelf that had always been known as the flat. As
we cleared a pine thicket, I could see a little shack of weatherbeaten boards and tin roof sitting in the middle of the flat beneath its only tree, a middle-aged white oak.

Dad took us around the house to the side facing the hollow, where the only window and door both stood wide open. "I've been leavin' 'em open all the time cause it's been so damned hot," Dad explained as he led us inside.

The place couldn't have been more than twelve by twelve. Floored with rough, pine planks, its inside walls were merely the flipside of the outside walls. A tattered, brown coat and three well-worn shirts hung from ten-penny nails driven into the wall beside the door. Standing out from one wall on a thin metal plate was a woodstove with its flue doglegging out of the wall behind. With its head against another wall stood an old iron, twin bed and, beside it, an orange crate holding three books, an oil lamp atop that. In the middle of the room sat the rest of the furniture—a straight chair and a small, beatup table holding a blackened coffee pot, a beat-up pan, a knife, fork, and spoon, a blue enameled cup, and a dull white plate with a blue circle and logo reading Southern Railroad.

Dad's eyes shined with pride as he said, "Houston helped on the roof some, but I did all the rest o' this. I like it out here. It's real quiet."

"I'm thirsty," Lilly whined.
"All I got's water...Or I kin fix ya some sassafras tea. I got honey I kin put in it."

"Okay," Lilly said.

"Ya'll have to share. I only got the one cup."

"That's okay. I don't care for any," I said quietly.

Standing still in the middle of the room, I watched the stranger prepare the tea. Lilly pulled the chair over next to the orange crate, then sat down, leaning over with her head cocked sideways to look at the book titles.

"What's Ruby's Yacht about?" she asked.

Dad laughed as he twisted to look at Lilly. "That's The Rubiyat. It's a hard one to explain. Still, it's a good book--by an Arab guy named Kibran." He turned back to the tea and honey.

"I gotta another book I know ya'll 'll like," he said, stirring in honey as he carried the cup to Lilly. After placing the cup on the corner of the crate, he picked up Lilly then sat down, placing her on his left knee.

He set the book on top to the side; I could see the faded gold letters on its black spine--Holy Bible. Dad held up the middle book of the stack, "Now this book is a humdinger. Black Elk Speaks. It's about Ind'ans an' it's by a Ind'an."

"Hey, an' Momma says you're part Indian," Lilly said, "so me an' Will's part Indian too, right?"
"Ya mean ya'll done forgot yore grandma 'n her stories? An' ya've forgot 'bout Grandma Stokes?"

I hadn't forgotten, but I didn't say anything.

"Has yore momma told ya that there ain't just Ind'an on my side 'a yore family?"

Lilly and I both looked surprised and she said, "There is?"

"There sure is," Dad said. "One o' yore ma's grandpas wuz Cherokee, but they never admit to it. Reckon to them it's too much like bein' nigger. Ya'll 've heard yore momma's people use words like wado and saloli, I'll bet."

"Yes sir. They mean 'thank you' and 'squirrel' in Welsh," I said.

"Yo're right 'bout what they mean, but they sure as hell ain't Welsh. Those words are pure Cherokee. O' course, it ain't yore fault that ya'll don't know. If things was different, ya'll would've spent more time with my side o' the family an' ya'd know."

Lilly's eyes brightened, "So, we are part Indian!"

"Well, you an' Will got Ind'an grandpas and Ind'an grandmas, but ya got white grandpas and white grandmas too. Are ya part Ind'an or are ya part white?...Are yore fingers Ind'an?" Dad smiled as he lifted Lilly's hand. "Or maybe it's yore toes," he said as he gently shook Lilly's foot.
Dad's face suddenly clouded and it was as if Lilly and me were no longer in the room; he became serious and, in a whisper, said, "I dunno. I dunno if anybody kin be part Ind'an....Hell, maybe that's the problem; maybe it's plumb like mixin' two different blood types. They just keep crossin' each other up an' it just won't work...it just ain't never gonna work." Then, he shook his head slightly and opened the book, flipping through it to show us photographs.

I stepped behind them so I could look over their shoulders.

"Yeah, now this here's a good book." Pointing to a young Indian man in one picture, he said, "This is Black Elk when he was with Buffalo Bill's show. Black Elk was a great man, a medicine man. He fought at the Little Big Horn when Custer got his. Least that's one time when the sons-o'-bitches got what was comin' to 'em....Black Elk was only thirteen years old. Yo're thirteen, ain't ya Will?"

I nodded yes.

"Can ya imagine fightin' in a big battle at your age?"

"No sir," I answered.

Again, my father's voice softened. "I see it sometimes, ya know."

"What?" Lilly asked.
"The battle. I'm there. I'm at the Little Big Horn an' the battle's ragin'. 'Cept I ain't on either side; I'm smack in the middle an' everbody's shootin' guns an' arrows just at me. I'm hollerin', 'I ain't supposed to be here,' but none o' 'em won't listen to me. Both sides--they just keep shootin', just at me."

When Lilly pointed at another picture, asking, "Who's that?," Dad turned back to the book.

I labored to breathe. I couldn't speak. My tongue lay hard against the roof of my mouth, plastered there by fear and a muddle of questions. No words could form answers and I couldn't speak chaos.

Leaving my father and sister looking at the pictures, I stepped through the door, out of the stifling heat in the house. Pulling at the T-shirt glued to my body by clammy sweat, I thought, Dad was right about the quiet; the only sounds came from the grass and bushes rustling in the slight breeze, the angry-sounding zzzz of the wasps working on their nest over my head in the peak of the house, and, from the briar patch next to the lower edge of the woods where I knew they were feasting on overripe blackberries, the buzzing of June bugs. I looked across the hollow before me at the unbroken dark green of Sims Ridge. Below, a line of willows, glistening in waves of heat, glanced against the base of the far ridge, curved away into dark green,
bottomland corn, curved again to the ridge—back and forth, snaking its way to the distant gap. I knew that that line of willows sheltered Buffalo Run Creek. It wasn't visible, but I knew it was there, gurgling cool and clear over smooth, brown rocks, cutting its track in the red earth. It wasn't visible, but I could see it.
"It's a Dr. Goldman, your dad's doctor," Momma said as she extended the receiver to me.

"He wants to talk to me?"

"You're eighteen now. You're your dad's next-of-kin, so he needs to talk to you."

"Yes, Will," Dr. Goldman said, "it's been some time since any of your father's family have been consulted. I think that it would be very helpful for you to come by to talk about Kyle's condition. And I'm certain he would love to see you. Is there a time next week that will be convenient?"

Five days later, I drove onto the grounds of the state hospital—a place that I was visiting for the first time I could remember and the kind of place where my father had lived over half of his life. For a half-hour, I sat in Dr. Goldman's office as the psychiatrist explained Dad's condition: Kyle suffered from schizophrenia. Medical science knew much more about it than they had a few years ago, but it still remained largely a mystery. Something had gone wrong in the brain, they knew that. The brain has synapses that fire in little electrical bursts; but, for unknown
reasons, the synapses in the brains of those with schizophrenia often misfire, occasionally don't.

"We've come a long way with medications," Dr. Goldman said. "We now have some drug regimens that bring temporary relief and stability to many patients. Your father is an example of this; he's been doing somewhat better recently, thanks to a new medication. Still, none of the drugs have a permanent effect. In other words--at this time, there is no cure. Do you have any questions?"

I didn't hear the doctor's question. Only some sound, distant and vaguely human, entered my ears as thousands of explosions buffeted words. Synapses. Schizophrenia.

"Will, do you have any questions?" Dr. Goldman repeated.

Some burst of electricity said, "No."

"Remember, whatever your father may say or do, don't take it personally. It's not you. It's this strange sickness."

A stiff wind cut my face like a cold razor as I stepped from the old house that had been converted into psychiatrists' offices. With my eyes squinted into narrow slits, I walked to the car, my head bent against the wind and my collar pulled up tight around my ears. Still, the
moisture rose in my eyes, spilled over in thin streaks down my cheeks.

After starting the car, I wiped my eyes and face hard. The car needed time to warm up, I told myself. Long minutes passed as the exhaust chugged thick, gray smoke into a gray winter sky thick with snow. The engine sputtered into a rhythm, then steadily quickened its pace, racing in place; my brain matched the engine revolution for revolution. I saw small, fiery explosions of electricity.

I glanced over the doctor's directions to my father's building. Dr. Goldman said it was located on the far side of the "campus." The "campus"—as I drove, I thought of libraries and logic, of certainty bound in paper, sheltered by mortar. But I saw illusions and chaos in brains.

The room in which we stood was large and almost bare of furniture. A ping-pong table with a broken leg leaned precariously against one wall. In a corner on the opposite side of the room, a TV droned a steady, unintelligible hum; its only viewers were a gray, plastic-covered couch squatting eight feet in front, bracketed by single, straight chairs.

I thought the TV must be schizophrenic too. On its face, a couple of men in a boat floated in a toilet. Then, a split-second later, Jim and Margaret Anderson and their
three children sat in a spacious dining room, before a large table loaded down with food. I was amazed that, though their mouths moved constantly, not one of them was eating, not one seemed the least interested in eating. Their mouths moved constantly, in a haunting conversation of silence and lips twisted into macabre smiles.

"Kierkegaard said that." Dad spoke without looking at me.

"Sir?"

"That. That the church didn't know what Christianity was all about anymore. An' ya know what Nietzsche said, o' course. Bullshit, so damn much bullshit."

"Yes sir," I thought I replied; Dad's quiet words sank in the morass of one word bubbling in my head: schizophrenia.

Dad spoke without looking at me, staring over my right shoulder. His eyes narrowed momentarily into slits, hot and angry; then, like shades springing open, they opened wide: bottomless black centers sucking bright veins of red and purple across dingy white. Moisture rimmed his lower lids, pearled in the corners of his eyes.

As I slowly turned, the grit under my feet softly scratched the neglected linoleum. Paralleling my father's vision, I saw the sweating, picture window. Through the sprinkled and streaked glass, I could see a season
distorted. I saw the snow showers of late December whip the grounds of the state hospital—the jaundiced grass, the ancient, dull-red-brick buildings, the icy, black limbs of great trees.

I looked at my father who was dressed in a comfortably familiar flannel shirt, brown corduroy pants, and scuffed-up black brogans. His eyes were even darker than I remembered, perhaps because of the contrast with his now white hair. I wondered what those eyes were seeing. Though I knew it was ill-mannered, I couldn’t help myself; I stared at my father. I saw synapses and bursts of electricity flashing like lights on a pinball machine.

A woman walked into the room wearing battered, black tennis shoes, a plaid flannel shirt spotted with egg yolk, and a wrap-around, gray skirt that struck her just below the knees, revealing pale calves and shins covered with short, black hairs.

Dad’s eyes seemed to return from some other place; they brightened as he stood and smiled. The woman walked to him. He stroked her stringy, graying hair as he put his right arm around her shoulders.

“This is my girlfriend, Lois,” he said as he kissed her on the cheek. “We’re gonna get married, right Darlin’?”
Lois smiled a small, embarrassed grin. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t look at Dad or me; her gaze was fixed on the floor between the three of us.

“Oh,” I said because I didn’t know what else to say, suddenly remembering my father call my mother “Darlin’” in what seemed like another life.

Dad hugged the woman to him, scrunching up her shoulders and drawing her onto one foot. He kissed her on the forehead. Then, looking at me, he asked, "How's Lilly doin'?"

"She's fine. She's doing fine."

"How's your momma?"

"She's fine too."

"Ya know the Bible says a good woman is more precious than fine jewels," Dad said as he squeezed Lois to him again.

"Yes sir."

"Do ya read yore Bible much?"

"Every once in a while. Not much really," I answered. "Ya oughta read it. It's got their plan in it, ya know."

"Their plan?"

Dad didn't answer; that distant look descended on his face again.
I watched my father closely. I saw a rippling, gray mass covered by staccato bursts of light, like flashbulbs against a filled stadium. I saw inside my own head; bursts of electricity fired randomly. I shook my head sharply, focused on order. I had to ask, "What plan? Whose plan?"

Dad gazed intently at me, then repeated, "Their plan....Jeremiah knew. Jesus knew. They keep talkin' 'bout love, then trick us into cuttin' our balls off. They're slick. They want us all to be like Origin."

I again shook my head, slightly this time. Order, I thought, logic; these would be a balm for my heart. "Whadda ya mean, origin? Like things were in the beginning?"

"Nah, Origin was a guy they tricked into cuttin' his own balls off. It ain't easy to keep 'em."

I saw flames flashing behind my father's eyes.

"Ya gotta see it," Dad said, his eyes boring into my chest. "Black Elk saw it. I know Tecumseh saw it. They was like Jesus; they saw it clear as glass. They don't want nobody to keep their balls, ya know. But I still got mine....Ya gotta keep yours."

"Yes sir....But I don't see what ya mean." I hesitated, then said, "I mean, none of it quite makes sense to me."

The words barely cleared my lips when Lois suddenly screamed at me, "You're a goddamn liar!" Her forehead
tightened in blood-red furrows and her fists, held tightly against her hips, clenched and unclenched. Her eyes were wide and wild as she screamed again, "You're a goddamn liar!"

She took two small steps in my direction. I held my place, fighting the urge to back away. Then, as she screamed again, "Goddamn liar!," she raised clenched fists and stepped quickly toward me. I stumbled backwards, saved from sprawling onto my back by my butt coming to rest on the top of the sofa back.

My father stepped between Lois and me, placing his hands on her shoulders. She lowered her arms, and her fingers slowly uncurled as a shiver swept from her head down the length of her body.

My heart hammering, I stared over my father's shoulder at the woman. She stared right back at me; her eyes smouldered. She spoke in a deep, raspy voice that reminded me of a panther, "Goddamn liar."

"Darlin'. Yo're right, Darlin'. Yo're sure as shit right," Dad said. "We're all goddamn liars. Yeah, we're all goddamn liars, ain't we?"

Her face and body slowly softened, melted into silence again. The three of us melted into silence for several minutes.
Dad finally spoke, "They think they got the plan; they think they're trickin' me. The Lord's told me that if these doctors don't cut out all their bullshit, he's gonna strike 'em down. Maybe I'll do it for Him. I'm sick of 'em fuckin' with me all the time."

I didn't say anything; I couldn't say anything.

"It's just like Kierkegaard an' Lincoln said. The Lord told me that He's gonna get these assholes--Him or some bear. Ya know, the Creator still uses animal spirits. He told me so. They killed a bear just a few miles from here last week ya know. They said it'd just wandered in from the mountains, but it was on its way here."

My father's eyes were distant again.

I felt like I was suffocating. My stomach churned.

"Dad, I've got to go. I promised Momma I'd be home by five," I lied.

"Okay, boy. Watch out. Remember what I told ya."

"Yes sir," I said as we shook hands.

I wheeled, walked quickly to the door, then paused briefly to look back over my shoulder. My father's arm was draped over Lois' shoulders as they sat close together on the couch. They stared at the "Leave It to Beaver" house silently flickering on the TV.

The floor creaked a slow rhythm that paced my steps. The bleak hall seemed a long tunnel before I finally burst
through the outer door into the icy wind. The blowing snow stung my face, but I was thankful for it as it pounded away the oppressive stupor that had swept over me. Walking to the car, I gulped in the cold air. I leaned against the driver's door, closed my eyes, tilted back my head, letting the winter cleanse the confusion from my mind. But my heart was still being strangled.

I opened my eyes. About halfway up the oak in front of me, a squirrel sat on a black limb sprinkled with snow. Somewhere, the squirrel had found an acorn. Now, he sat on that limb in the midst of winter's barrenness, snow and ice on the ground and tree, the frigid wind ruffling his fur, a frozen acorn held in his front paws, eating. He would survive, I could see that. As he looked down on me from his wintry perch, I could see--moon after moon, winter after winter, eons even. I could see it--Saloli would survive.
Benediction 1976

After eight years, my father laid before me—a memory now flesh and bone and blood, frail and small within the rails of the hospital bed. I watched him sleeping and the air was heavy, stagnant like a small pool separated from its source and long orphaned. Still, motionless as the forest before it is assaulted by an approaching storm that is gathering power. Silent, as if it was incapable of carrying sound; there was only a low, guttural roar—the sound that closes in on ears at the bottom of a deep pool. Only my heart pumping, pounding, laboring.

I watched my father sleeping and couldn't decide whether he seemed an elder or an infant. Only forty-eight, his hair had long been white and now his skin seemed a pale yellow, not brown. I wondered if he was dreaming, if it was a dream awash in alcohol and meandering through some place called mental illness. Or, if perhaps it was a vision, a dream of places whose names had been changed or forgotten and of people whose blood swirled other stories. I couldn't remember this man; I remembered my father as dark and strong. And I remembered almost a quarter-century of dreams.

"Will," my wife whispered as she took my hand in hers, "He's resting so good. Let's let him rest and we'll come back in the morning."
"Alright, Bonnie," I answered, relieved that I could postpone facing this man whom the doctor had said was extremely confused and angry.

That night, lying on my back in bed, I watched the October moon move across the window, trailing light that filled our bedroom. The open curtains occasionally swelled away from the window sill, carried for a moment by a cool breeze. Listening closely, I heard only the steady rhythm of Bonnie sleeping.

I couldn't sleep. As quietly as I could, I crawled out of bed, slipped on my underpants, and walked through the dark house to the kitchen. In the utility room just off the kitchen, I dug into the bottom of my tool box and pulled out the six pack of PBR that I had stashed earlier in the day. Popping the tab on one, I took a long pull on the warm beer. Then, another. After putting the other five in the freezer, I went into the living room, pulled the drapes wide open, sat in my lounge chair. Behind the glass of the picture window, the moon slid slowly, the trees swayed in rhythm with the wind, and, off in the distance, I heard a whippoorwill calling. I sat in the dark house and smoked and drank until there were no beers left.

When I crawled back into bed, I didn't look at the clock; I didn't want to know the time. I turned my face
toward Bonnie. She was sleeping on her side, her swollen belly against my hip. Her long, auburn hair draped her pillow and part of mine, tickling at my shoulder and chin. The covers fell across her mid-thigh and her gown had ridden up, finally stopped by a stomach that was growing fuller every day. In the moonlight, the bare swell of her hip glowed smooth and white. I laid my hand on that swell, allowing my forearm to rest gently on the side of her stomach. And beneath my arm, I felt the slightest of movements—a small turn, a little wave of an arm perhaps.

My eyes slid along the landscape of Bonnie's side to her face. Beneath closed eyelids, the small mounds of her irises moved in a quick-step dance; she was dreaming. I wondered if she was dreaming about her babies—the two year old asleep across the hall and the one still a mystery. Was she dreaming about me? Or, was she dreaming about the shoes she had seen at the mall? The new house she said she was in love with?

Her face gave no hint of the subject of her dream. It only seemed to show a peace, a contentment that I suddenly resented. How wonderful it must be, I thought, to know only one story—one of Jesus with a comfortable bank account, staunch brick homes trimmed in green lawns, the luxury of a full stomach and decisions about college and summer
vacation. How wonderful it must be to know only such a story and sleep with such peaceful dreams.

The smooth, white ceiling of our bedroom flickered to the beat of my eyelids, became the sterile walls of my father's hospital room. He was still sleeping, still so different from the man I remembered.

The bright walls slowly dimmed as I heard the doctor's warning: Your father is extremely confused and will probably exhibit great anger. Do you understand? Yes, I had lied.

I didn't understand shit. I fell asleep longing for some bar, gallons of Jack Daniels, and somebody—anybody—to punch in the face.

The next morning Bonnie and I paused at the door to room 412 of the Chest Disease Hospital. I could see my apprehension mirrored in her eyes. I took a deep breath, then pushed the door open.

He was asleep, so we tip-toed to chairs next to a window that covered almost an entire wall. It was a nice room—not fancy, but nice with bright, white walls and a shiny tile floor. Since my father's bed was the only one in a room obviously made for two, it had a spacious, airy feel.

Outside that window, it was a beautiful October morning of blue crystal sky and starchy clean clouds. A couple of grandfatherly trees, an oak and a maple, stood about a
hundred feet from the window—where they could be easily seen, but without blocking the rest of the view. They were beginning to display the brilliant colors that precede their rest, the dazzling red of the maple and the oak's deep burgundy. Sleek Black Angus cattle picked their way across the hillside pasture a hundred yards from us. Beyond that, the ridges and low mountains of East Tennessee rippled and tumbled toward the horizon, mottled gold, orange, red, and dark cedar green. A jagged edge along the horizon, the Smoky Mountains rose hazy blue and powerful; the peaks, already in winter, glistened white in the morning sun.

"Good mornin'," my father said as a big, toothy smile broke across his face. "I guess I kinda dozed off. That's quite a view ain't it."

"Yes sir, it is something."
"Have ya seen the crows?" he asked.
"No, we haven't," I answered.
"They'll be 'round. I've got some crows that come 'round to talk to me."

My body stiffened, preparing for the doctor's prophecy to be fulfilled. Just then, two crows landed on one of the high limbs of the maple. Facing the window, they immediately began to talk excitedly, one at a time, then jabbering together, always watching my father's window.
"Ya see whut I mean, there they are. There's usually four a' 'em though. We carry on some good conversations."

Then looking to the crows, he said, "Yeah, I see ya. Good mornin', good mornin'."

They were quiet as he spoke to them, but then they spoke again.

"Yes," he said, "later." A small grin curled his mouth and I saw a clarity in his eyes that surprised me.

That morning and the following days and weeks were filled with "small talk," talk of ancestors, cousins, aunts and uncles, and food, the Army and the weather, dogs and roosters. It was the talk of the kitchen table, hot afternoons in the garden, evenings on the porch, moments before bed. It was the fine threads of lives interwoven, a story most often taken for granted--a story I didn't know. He told stories.

"Did I ever tell y'all 'bout whut we used to do over in the pine thicket on yore grandma's place?"

"No sir."

Dad laughed. "Boy, we used to have a ball. We's just young boys, me 'n Delbert Smith 'n Frank Hawkins, yore Uncle Aaron 'n some others--I can't remember all them names now. We'd climb up in the tops o' them young cedars 'n pines, get 'em to swayin' back 'n forth, then travel all over that thicket in them tree tops."
Dad laughed and Bonnie and I laughed with him as we pictured a bunch of boys traveling across the tree tops like monkeys.

"I remember one July when I's 'bout eight or nine," he said. "It wuz hot. Damn, it wuz hot. And dry—everbody's corn wuz done fried. Well, me 'n my usual group o' fellers got to thinkin' 'bout cold weather—'bout how we wished it wuz winter. We got to thinkin' 'bout snow 'n how much fun we'd have slidin'. So, we decided to make us a slidin' place. We got us a tore-up pasteboard box 'n went down to the big, clay bank next to the tobacco patch. Then, we all lined up on top o' the bank, five 'r six a' us, 'n all together pissed down that bank to make her slick so's we could do some slidin'."

The three of us roared with laughter. We laughed until tears rolled down our cheeks.

"That wuz some time," Dad said, wiping the tears from his eyes as he crushed out an ever-present Lucky.

In the midst of a fabric being woven, my father's physical condition deteriorated steadily. His skin was a sheet, worn thin and discolored, draped over the sharp angles of bones. He talked less and less, in a voice like the sigh of winter breezes through the eaves of a barn. But, he never complained. He never moaned, only his expression
would change more and more frequently from bright to strained.

It reached the point that he could no longer turn over by himself, so Bonnie and I often turned him.

One day Bonnie said, "You sure have got your dad's butt."

"What?"

"I said, your butt looks just like your dad's. Neither one of ya's got one," she said as she grinned.

I had often wondered if my father was in me, how and where he might be in me. I had worried that he wandered in my brain, that it was destined to see things that others couldn't see and say things others couldn't hear. I had worried that I carried his flesh, flesh that demanded alcohol. I heard Bonnie say that I had my dad's butt and I smiled.

Late one December evening, I lingered in Dad's room as the hospital intercom announced for the third time that visiting hours were over. Most of that evening we had simply been together, alone, as he dozed off and on and I tried to find words to map my thoughts, to match my heart.

Finally, I rose and said, "Well, guess I'd better go."

He nodded and raised his hand toward me, the elbow still on the bed. I shook his hand lightly as I stammered, "Dad, I...I...." I lifted my eyes to the white wall gleaming
in the light of the bedside table lamp and felt tears well up like unspoken prayers. Shifting my weight slowly from one foot to the other, then back again, I finally spit out, "I'll, uh, see ya tomorrow."

I could feel him change the handshake; it became hands held. "Will," he whispered hoarsely as he looked directly into my eyes. His eyes seemed old and tired, yet they were unclouded. His hand weakly pulled me over, closer.

"Will, we both know I'm 'bout to take a trip....But death ain't no end...I'm lookin' forward to it....I've seen a place like our mountains 'n yore grandma's there." A shallow, hacking cough stole his words and I looked away; the window, now a black wall in the night, held our images, dimming and brightening, appearing and disappearing with each nuance of light or movement.

As the cough subsided, he spoke in weak gasps, "Lots o' relatives. ...even ol' Tick. ...Remember Tick?"

He closed his eyes, breathing hard as his hand grew limp in my hand. My eyes burned and my throat choked off any words that might have formed.

"It's green there, Will," he said as he reopened his eyes. "It's real green there...'n there's plenty to eat...'n laughin'...'n I'm gonna dance." Again, he looked me directly in the eyes and in a voice suddenly stronger, he said, "Remember yore grandma's stories. Don't let nobody tell ya
whut there is to see or to hear. Remember whut she said 'n foller this," he said as he tapped me lightly on the chest.

Silence filled the room. Finally, I choked out, "Guess I'd better go."

"I'll be seein' ya," Dad said. And his whole face smiled.

Two days later, Bonnie and I were frantically spending the last short, cold days before Christmas. For a long time, it had seemed a strange holiday to me, creating a confusing mixture of happiness and sadness. I always loved the family gatherings and the bright excitement in childrens' eyes. But there was also the press of time and money--decorating and Santa Claus and the annual-only purchase of gifts, purchases too often carefully balanced against those expected to be received. And, each Christmas, there were empty places. In the midst of this bittersweet frenzy, I was called to the hospital.

The room smelled of death--feces, urine, and that strange pungency of dying flesh--death poorly masked by hospital antiseptic. Dad was lying on his left side, facing the window, curled in a fetal position. He inhaled in long, labored wheezes that ended in great shudders; he exhaled slowly--rattling, gurgling.
I took his hand which was hanging over the side of the bed. I looked at Bonnie, who stood just a few steps inside the door. She was crying.

Remembering that I had once read that the sense of hearing is the last to go, I bent over, close to his ear, and whispered, "I love you, Dad." Tears streamed down my face.

The moments between his breaths steadily increased, becoming moments in which I held my breath. Finally, one moment stretched on and on. He only lay there, still, peaceful. I looked up at Bonnie and said, "You'd better get the nurse."

I looked around the room. My father and I were in the room alone. I looked around the room--looking for something, listening for something. I didn't know exactly what. There was only some hospital furniture, four walls, a floor, a ceiling.

There was a window. Through the window, I saw four crows land on the black limb of the oak. Silent for a moment, they looked toward the window. Suddenly, they began chattering away. Then, together they stepped from the limb and flew, swinging away to the West. I watched them fly over the fields of Black Angus, the ridges, the forests, toward the glistening mountains. I watched them until they disappeared, as if through a seam in the December sky.
I sleep. I dream. I walk in mountains deep green against the blue sky. Cold, clear streams tumble toward the valleys, more voices in a song being sung by all, to the beat of a drum. I see my father walking ahead of me; his hair is black and his step is sure. And beyond him, I see a village. Small children are running after one another and boys are playing in pines at the edge of the camp. Turning from a small group of elders, my grandmother sees my father and joy covers her face. With arms thrown wide and calling his name, she walks quickly to him, hugs him tightly. I smell woodsmoke and food cooking. I hear laughter. I hear the drum. As my father and grandmother walk arm in arm toward the village, he looks back over his shoulder at me and smiles. I smile too; I will join the dance soon enough.
I'm ashamed to tell you this, but here it is: I'm in jail. But, I'm not some common criminal; you need to understand one thing--I was raised right. Burrell Sloan--that's me--and his younger sisters, Connie and Linda, all know the clear difference between right and wrong. Our momma raised all three of us right. And in these crazy times, with the devil working overtime and deceiving so many people, that's a tough job for any momma and daddy. And it's even tougher when there's not two of 'em to work together; that's the way it was for my mother.

See, Daddy got electrocuted in the spring right before I turned seven. He was the janitor over at Sandy Bottom Grammar School. It rained an unusual lot that spring and all the creeks and rivers was out-of-bank and a number of roads got washed out. Momma told us that she thought that the whole Cumberland Plateau was gonna get washed right outta of Tennessee; it was the only time she could remember the Wolf washing out the 127 bridge, the one down to Pall Mall. Well, with all that water, the basement at the school wound up with eight inches of water standing in it.

Mr. Wyrick, the school principal, asked Daddy to see if he could clean it up. Nobody thought about that old furnace
Momma said Mr. Wyrick told her that he thought about it a few minutes later and went to tell Daddy to be sure to turn off the electricity and that's when he found him. As soon as Daddy stepped off that last step into the water, he was dead.

So Momma was twenty-four and left with three kids to raise by herself. Aunt Liddie, Momma's oldest sister, came down to take care of all of us, and I remember Momma staying in her and Daddy's room for days. Through the closed door, I could hear her crying, sometimes softly, oftentimes sobbing so hard that I was afraid she was choking to death. Then I'd start crying too. Aunt Liddie'd pick me up with a grunt, saying "Go-o-odness gracious, you're sure getting to be a big boy." She'd carry me to the rocker and hold me tight against her, one hand on the back of my head pressing my snotty nose against her shoulder and neck. "Everything's gonna be alright," she'd say as we rocked slowly. "Your momma's gonna be alright." Then she'd always start singing softly: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world...." And tears would run down her cheeks.

Back then, John Lambert was just starting as the preacher at Jordan River Freewill Baptist Church where we went to preaching every Sunday morning and night and to prayer meeting every Wednesday night. He'd been the preacher at the Forbus Ridge church for several years, but had quit
when the deacons voted to start using the Revised Standard Version instead of the King James Bible. That's when we called him to be our preacher.

He was young, not more than twenty-five or thirty, slim and tall, with icy blue eyes and black hair he slicked straight back. He'd come over almost every evening. Momma'd come out of her room and the four of us would sit in the living room. Connie and Linda'd play dolls in our bedroom, but I didn't want to play; I wanted to sit on the couch against Momma and listen. Aunt Liddie and Momma, especially Momma, never said much.

Preacher Lambert talked a lot. I don't remember exactly what he'd say, but I do clearly remember him talking about the Apostle Paul, how he suffered terribly and how the people he loved suffered terribly.

"Paul didn't rightly understand all of it. Remember what he wrote to the Corinthians," the preacher'd say. Then his voice would rise as he'd point a finger toward heaven and smile, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face."

He'd always wind up his visits by reading something from the Bible, usually one of the Psalms, most often the Twenty-third Psalm. Even back then, thanks to Sunday School, I already had that Psalm memorized. But, being a kid, I'd never really thought about the meaning of the words. "Thy
rod and thy staff, they comfort me," he read. But I couldn't feel any comfort, and it sure didn't seem like Momma was feeling any comfort. I wondered where God's rod and staff were.

Preacher Lambert'd want all of us to pray together. Aunt Liddie'd call to my sisters, "Come on in here, girls. We're gonna pray with the preacher."

Linda and Connie'd stand, one on each side of Aunt Liddie's legs, leaning against the couch and fidgeting from one leg to the other 'til Aunt Liddie'd put a hand on each of 'em's shoulder, lean forward and whisper, "Now, bow your heads and close your eyes. The preacher's gonna pray."

We'd all bow our heads and close our eyes as Preacher Lambert began to pray. Sometimes, even though I worried that it might upset God, I'd open my eyes a tad to look at the preacher. He'd be leaning forward in the rocker, his elbows on his knees, his head bowed slightly with the lamplight shining on his Brylcreamed hair. Mostly, I watched his big hands, nicked and callused from where he worked as a roofer during the day. As he prayed, his interlocked fingers'd tighten into one huge fist, turning the knuckles white, turning black-purple the ever-present bruise under the nail of his left index finger. I hoped that he was crushing the devil between those hands, crushing the thief who must've stole God's comfort from our lives.
Sometimes, as he prayed, I'd feel the little hairs on my arms and at my temples kinda move, like somebody'd passed real close to me without actually touching me. The first time that happened it scared me. I opened my eyes real quick to see who was so close, but nobody was; everybody was sitting in their same places, their heads bowed and eyes closed. Then, that same feeling swept over me again, and I knew, just knew, it had to be the Holy Spirit.

His prayer would end just like all the hundreds of prayers I've heard him pray over the years, "We pray all this, Heavenly Father, in the holy name of Your Son, Jesus, and under the anointing of Your Holy Spirit. Amen and amen."

Then he'd stand up and say, "Well, I guess I'd better head down the road." His wife had supper waiting on him, or Mrs. Harvey's granddaughter was in Oneida hospital with a broke leg, or old Mr. Sharp was in bad shape down in a Knoxville hospital.

Momma and Aunt Liddie'd shake hands with him and thank him for dropping by. And after he drove away, before the dust settled back to the gravel, Connie and Linda'd be arguing over a doll and Momma 'd be back in her room with the door closed.

I'm not sure how long it went on like that, maybe a couple of weeks, maybe a month or more. But then a miracle happened; one morning when us kids got up, Momma was already
up, talking and laughing with Aunt Liddie as the two of 'em fixed breakfast. She'd already changed out of her gown into what she always called a house dress and her long brown hair was fixed nice. The black bags that'd been under her eyes for so long were all but gone. And she greeted each of us with a bear hug, a kiss, and a cheery "Good mornin'."

When we were all sitting at the table, Linda and Connie and me automatically bowed our heads and closed our eyes, waiting on Momma to ask the blessing. But instead of praying, Momma called each of us by name. We looked up and she said, "Kids, you know the preacher sure is right. This world is filled with hardship and heartbreak, and it's hard to understand why the Lord lets the devil get away with it. We just can't see things clearly--the whys of a thing--while we're in this world. But last night, the Lord sent His Holy Spirit to me and your daddy was with Him. I don't know why this had to happen, but I know the Lord'll never let the devil win. And I know now that we're all gonna make it through this vale of tears."

Then, she bowed her head and the rest of us bowed our heads and Momma prayed, prayed just like she did over every meal I ate with her from then 'til the day she died, "Give us strength to keep the devil from our doorstep. Thank You for this food and for our many other blessings. Thank You for Your love for us, Heavenly Father, for the sacrifice of
Your Son Jesus, and for the comfort of Your Holy Spirit.
Amen."

"Amen," we repeated.

I didn't understand it all back then. I didn't understand why the Lord let the devil hurt so many good people. I didn't understand why my daddy was dead. But, in a way, I didn't care. Daddy was dead and nothing could change that. That I understood. And besides, I knew he was in heaven waiting on the rest of us. But, Momma was still alive, and I wanted her to stay that way. I didn't understand why my daddy had to die, but I knew that somehow the Lord had spoken to Momma and that she'd quit pining her life away. She was gonna to be okay. God was with all of us and we all were gonna be okay.

Aunt Liddie went back to her husband and four kids up in Pine Knot. We started back to church every Sunday morning and night and every Wednesday evening. And the following fall, Mr. Wyrick gave Momma a job cooking in the school cafeteria, where she worked for years.

Now you understand, my momma worked hard, took us to church; she raised us right. Neither of my sisters or me have ever been in the least bit of trouble. But that changed six weeks ago. I'm forty-one years old, and I'm in jail for the first time in my life.
The judge said I was gonna have to do jail time for putting a man in the hospital with a busted cheekbone. It's true that I did exactly that. But the real reason I'm here is because the devil can take anything and twist it and use it to hurt you. Why else would a man who hadn't been in a fight since he was in the sixth grade suddenly punch somebody?

This is even more embarrassing to talk about than being in jail is, but I want you to understand how Satan can work. Please don't take this wrong—but, in a way, I'm in jail because I've got an unusually large...uh...well, an unusually large dick. I'm in jail 'cause this world's gone crazy over sex and I've apparently got a big dick.

I say apparently because I really have no way to judge such a thing. I haven't been around that many naked guys, and it's not like I'd be looking at 'em anyway. Well, of course, when you're having to shower with a bunch of naked guys, you can't help but see; you can't very well shower with your eyes closed all the time. I'll admit, I've noticed some difference. But I've overheard guys talk about how much things change at certain times—you know, size-wise. Maybe theirs just changes more than mine. I don't know.

I've thought that maybe it's a kind of optical illusion. I was always the smallest boy in my class, and I'm a small man. Even now, I'm only five-six, a hundred forty-
two pounds. Maybe 'cause I'm on the small side overall, the thing just looks bigger. I just don't know.

I do know that God didn't make sex for us to be dwelling on it all the time, did He? Momma used to quote Romans a lot when Connie and Linda started getting interested in boys: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit—is life and peace." And she'd look at me and say, "The same goes for you too. God didn't make us to be acting like some dog in heat."

This trouble first cropped up when I started to Pickett County High School. Everybody had to take P.E. And after class everybody—at least, all the boys—had to take showers. Forty guys were trying to take showers in fifteen minutes with only six shower heads sticking out of the wall. I was waiting my turn, next in line, when Larry Andrews turned toward me as he rinsed his back. Suddenly, his eyes got big and he shouted, "Goddamn, would ya look at the dick on Sloan."

Of course, every guy in the locker room looked at me. Then Larry, still talking loud, said, "That's the biggest pecker I've ever seen on a guy. That thing's more like a damn third leg. I bet the women lov-v-ve you, huh Tripod?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't do anything except hurry to finish my shower, trying to face the wall as much
as possible. Larry had already failed two grades and was the biggest kid in the freshman class; he was a foul-mouthed bully who had a reputation for enjoying beating on smaller kids. I'll admit, I was afraid of him. But mostly, I didn't do anything simply because I was so embarrassed. Somehow, I felt ashamed.

But Larry just wouldn't let it go. Every day in gym, he said the same nasty things. In only a few days, every guy in school was calling me Tripod. It even seemed like some of the girls must've heard something because they were suddenly looking at me and giggling. For two weeks, I felt like I was in hell.

I knew I had to get outta there. But at first, I couldn't figure out how. I mean, this isn't the kind of thing a guy can talk to his mother about. Then one day in the library, I read about how the human back is so complicated; a person can have terrible back pain that doctors can never figure out. The very next day in gym, Coach Swilling had us racing up and down the rope hanging from the rafters. I acted like my hands slipped as I was coming back down and fell the last ten feet to the floor. I laid there groaning and complaining about how my back was killing me. Of course, the doctor never could find anything wrong, but I didn't have to go to another high school gym class. I didn't even have to go to the gym; Mr. Kline, the
school principal, said that'd be a waste of time, so he let me stay an extra period in metal shop. And after a while, everybody pretty much forgot about Larry's nickname for me.

To this day, I feel guilty about the way I got outta that class. I know what the Bible says about lying—and I knew it back then. For weeks afterward, I prayed for the Lord to forgive me and a couple of times thought about telling Momma or Preacher Lambert about my lie. But they'd have wanted to know why I lied, and there was no way that I could've told either of 'em about something like that. After a while, I didn't feel nearly so guilty, and it seemed like God was telling me it was okay this time. I mean, the Bible says "Thou shalt not kill," but still there are times when even good Christians should kill, right?

After high school, I was like most of the kids in my class; college just seemed like something for rich kids. Most of us just wanted to get a decent job so we could start making some money. I wanted to get into the apprenticeship program at Oak Ridge. Mr. Hadley, my shop teacher, knew some bosses in the machine shops down there, and he said he'd put in a good word for me because I was a natural at machining metals. He even said that the way I could take a rough chunk of metal and make something useful, even beautiful, out of it was an art. But the Vietnam War was on hot and heavy back then. Any man that didn't start to college right away was
headed for the army within a few months. I decided I might as well get it over with. And I was thinking that I might even wangle machinist training in the army. So I volunteered for the draft.

A few weeks later, I received my draft notice ordering me to report at 7:30 one morning to the Armed Forces Induction Center down in Knoxville. Their plan was to give everybody physicals that morning, then ship us all out late that afternoon. After having us strip down to our undershorts, they lined us up, and we slowly snaked our way from one cubicle to another, getting weighed here, getting blood pressure taken there.

For the last part of the physical, we wound up in a long narrow room, kinda like the living room in some shotgun houses. They formed us up into two lines, what must've been eighty guys, forty guys in one line facing forty guys in another line across the narrow room. A doctor entered through a door at the far end as a medic told all of us to drop our shorts to our ankles. It seemed like everybody was making sure they only looked straight ahead or up at the ceiling. I know I was.

Then as the doctor was pulling on a surgical glove, he said, "When I step in front of you, turn your head to the side and cough."
The doctor moved all the way down the line opposite the one I was in, then stepped across to check all of us in my line. I couldn't help noticing that he never changed that glove, so I was feeling even more uneasy about him checking me. But I knew I didn't have any choice and that this was about what to expect from the army anyway.

When he got to me, I turned my head, ready to cough. But he didn't check me right away; instead, he said something that I couldn't quite make out. "Sir?," I said, still keeping my head turned, ready to cough.

"I said, 'The good Lord has certainly blessed you.'"

At first, I thought he was being serious, and I felt better thinking that even in the army there was gonna be men who cared about the Lord. So I said, "Yes sir, He sure has."

But then I noticed the guys in line across from me; all of 'em were grinning like 'possums. I looked at the doctor and he had the biggest grin of all, and I suddenly realized just what he meant. I know my face turned beet-red. I was embarrassed and I was mad; the devil'd weaseled his way into a situation like that one and had even gotten his hands on a doctor of all people.

The doctor must've noticed my red face 'cause he said, "Don't be embarrassed, son. Hell, I'd be proud if it was me." Then he kinda laughed before he said, "Now turn your head and cough."
After he'd checked the rest of the men in my line, the doctor pulled off that glove, threw it in the trash, and picked up a flashlight. "Now we need to check your butts," he said. "Bend over and spread your cheeks."

So eighty guys with their shorts around their ankles bent over and spread their cheeks, ready for the doctor again. But the doctor handed the flashlight to a medic standing nearby. The medic went down the line opposite me, shining that flashlight and looking for something. Then he moved quickly down the row I was in 'til he got to me. He tapped me on the back and told me to step outta line. After he'd finished checking the rest of the guys, he handed the flashlight back to the doctor and whispered something to him.

The rest of the men were told to get their clothes back on. After they'd left the room, the doctor himself checked my rear, then said, "Well, it looks like the only place you're going is home."

The army wouldn't take me 'cause I had some kind of a cyst on my tailbone. I was a little worried about the cyst thing, but I was happy. I'd never really wanted to go in the army anyway. And I'd heard that a 4-F could get a good job pretty quick; with 4-F's, bosses knew they didn't have to worry about training some guy who was only gonna end up drafted.
And that's the way it worked out. With Mr. Hadley's help, a month after I failed that physical I was hired into the apprenticeship program at Oak Ridge. Right off the bat, I was making the kinda money and had the kinda benefits that my folks'd never even dreamed of. And I thought that that army doctor never realized how his smart-alecky words about the Lord blessing me were nothing but the pure truth.

Teresa and I have known each other all our lives. Our families've always gone to Jordan River Church and me and her were always in the same schools, though I was a grade ahead of her. From the time I was in the seventh grade and she was in the sixth, I think we knew we were gonna marry each other.

But we never really dated while we were in school; there wasn't any reason to. We saw each other all the time at school and at church. And at church, besides regular services, there was the youth group that was always doing something--going on a hayride and cookout down on the Brown's farm or over to Big South Fork Park or Christmas caroling. Anyway, we were both too busy, with all that plus her working part-time at the IGA and me doing the same at the Western Auto.

After she graduated from high school, Teresa just stepped into a full-time job at the IGA, and, by that time,
I'd finished a year of my four year apprenticeship. We decided that we'd save our money for a year, then get married.

Connie'd married Tim Goins when she was sixteen, right after he'd got back from eighteen months in Viet Nam, and they were living down at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. But Linda and me were still at home and, with the wages I was earning, I could help Momma out a lot and still save good money. And Teresa was still living at home too and able to save most of her check.

After we got married, we rented a trailer down at Sunbright. It wasn't very big, but it was plenty for us, and the three acre lot had a good garden spot. Teresa kept working at the IGA, and we kept saving our money to buy a little farm and, eventually, to build a house.

You wouldn't think that two people who'd known each other as long as we had would ever feel awkward around each other. But sometimes I did feel uneasy around her, and I felt like she felt the same thing. So I tried not to say much right after we married when, one night after another, our bed was only used for sleeping. I'd just cuddle up to her, whisper "I understand. Let me know when you're ready," and hope she'd cuddle back. I guess the whole notion takes some getting used to for any Christian woman; it was five days before Teresa got used to the notion.
We'd been married about six months when Satan put something in my head that I just couldn't seem to quit thinking about. One day as I was driving home from work, I suddenly started thinking about what old Larry Andrews had said, what the doctor at the Induction Center had said. I felt stupid wondering about it, and I felt guilty because I knew it was sinful to be thinking about something like that all the time.

Still, for three days, anytime I wasn't busy and had time to just think, that's what was on my mind. I began thinking that I oughtta ask Teresa about it. The night of that third day Teresa and me cuddled real good, if you know what I mean. Afterwards, she got up to go to the bathroom, and I was laying in bed feeling real relaxed. Maybe too relaxed because I decided I was gonna ask her.

As she walked into the bedroom, pulling her gown down over her hips, I blurted it out, "Am I big?"

She sat on the side of the bed to put on the footies she always wears when the weather's cold, and said, "Honey, you're only five-six and you're not fat. I don't think anybody'd call you a big man."

When I said, "No, that's not what I mean," she twisted around to look at me. I lifted the covers a little as I made a pointing motion with my chin and asked, "Is it big?"

"Well, it's bigger than a vienna sausage."
"I'm serious....You know....Is it unusually big?"

She flopped back on the bed with a hard sigh and jerked the covers up around her neck. "How am I supposed to know?!
What a thing to be talking about," she said as she turned her back to me, pulling the covers tighter around herself.

I knew Teresa was right. God gave us sex so the human race wouldn't die out. And it does make a couple feel closer, I guess. But there are a lot of things that're a lot more important. He didn't intend for us to be dwelling on that all the time. But you see how Satan can twist that, use that to get people off track.

After living down at Sunbright for a year, Teresa and me moved back up to Momma's. We were doing fine down there, but Momma had found out she had diabetes. When it came on, it came on hard, and it seemed like she was always sick from some complication or another. Momma said there wasn't any need for us to move back 'cause the Lord was looking after her. But we knew she was real lonely since Linda'd got married too and moved to Nashville. She was sick and lonely, and she was family; we needed to be with her instead of thirty miles away.

So life went on, ya know. Momma was sick so often that we persuaded her to quit work. I was a journeyman machinist at Oak Ridge making good money, and Teresa worked at the IGA, and we all went to church and saved our money. We
bought thirty-four acres just outta Deer Lodge, planning to build a house on it. But when our little girl, Lydia, named after my Aunt Liddie, came along after ten years of marriage, we decided that we needed more room right away. We put a double-wide on the place, and Teresa quit her job to be at home with Lydia and Momma.

The Lord's blessings seemed to fall on us like the manna that fell on God's people in the desert. That is, until a year-and-a-half ago.

One day as she was trying to get Lydia to take her cough syrup, Momma dropped the bottle, cutting the instep of her left foot on a piece of broken glass. In only a couple of days, gangrene had set in. In less than three weeks, she was dead.

Six weeks after Momma's funeral, I was laid off from Oak Ridge. Most of us down there had been afraid that was coming; the government had been steadily cutting back on making nuclear weapons. Still, it was a shock when the ax did fall; sixteen years is a long time to work at one place.

At first, I didn't worry too much though. I thought that surely a good machinist'd be snatched up quick by some company. But after three months, I still didn't have a job, not even a nibble on a job. After six months, the only work I'd done was as a helper for a friend of mine who builds houses. Teresa decided she'd go back to work at the IGA, but
they didn't have any jobs open. Slowly but surely, we slid into a hole; the bank began to press us hard about being behind on our payments on the place.

Teresa and I couldn't see what we'd done. Every night, we prayed about it together. We asked Preacher Lambert and the church to be praying for us, which they did every service. It almost seemed like the Lord'd just turned over control of our lives to the devil.

It was over a year before I finally got on with Hinckel's Controls down in Knoxville. They put me in the production shop where I turned out hundreds, sometimes thousands, of the same piece one after another as fast as I could work. There was no way I was an artist anymore; I was part of the machinery. It wasn't nearly as good a job as Oak Ridge, but the money was decent; we could get by.

My second week on the job--it's hard to believe that's only six weeks ago--I was at a lathe, churning out parts for thermostats, when somebody tapped me on the back. I shut her down and turned to face a big guy who just stood there grinning without saying anything. Finally, he said, "You don't remember me, do ya?"

I looked hard over his six-three frame: big belly hanging over his belt, big bushy red beard, racing-stripe-wrapping-around-the-side kind of bald head. Nothing rang a bell.
"C'mon, Tripod... It's Larry... Larry Andrews from high school."

I could feel my face flush, and I couldn't say anything.

"Remember... gym class? I work over in the punch room and somebody just told me that you were working in here. Thought I'd come check out my old buddy."

"Oh yeah," I said. "Good to see ya again Larry, but I gotta get back to work."

"Is that all you gotta say after all these years?"

"Well, I am glad to see ya, but I need to get back to it. You know how they are around here about making production."

Larry didn't seem to hear a word I said. He turned to the shop helper who had moved close to us as he was sweeping around the lathes, "Herb, me and old Burrell here went to high school together. I gave him his nickname—Tripod. We called him that because, even as a kid, this guy hung like a stud horse pissing in a pasture. To this day, his is the biggest damn dick I've ever seen on a man."

Herb smiled a snaggle-toothed grin and stuttered, "Sh-sh-sh-she-it."

"It's the god's truth," Larry said.
"Larry, I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk like that around me," I said as calmly as I could as my stomach fluttered and I felt heat rise through my body.

The grin fell from Larry's face like a mask snatched from a thief's face. "You always were a goody-goody sonafabitch," he spit the words at me. "Going to church all the time don't make you shit....TRIPOD."

My whole body suddenly felt hot, like the devil had jammed white-hot coals down my throat. All of it--all the hard times falling on my daddy, my momma, me--swelled up in my shoulder, my arm, my fist, and I hit him. In a split second, it just happened; I punched him hard in the chest. He fell back against the lathe motor, then bounced back toward me. I hit him again, as hard as I could on the left side of his face, and he fell like a rock.

There it is.

Of course, I was fired right on the spot. And here I sit in the Knoxville jail. 'Cause I'd never been in trouble before, the judge gave me only thirty days. Fourteen more days and I'm outta here, though I don't know what we're going to do then.

At first, I was shocked and scared; I've heard about what can happen to guys in jail. But Knoxville is opening a new jail and most of the prisoners are over there already.
They're letting men with less than thirty days to do stay in the old jail. My cell is dingy and beat up and smells of pee and vomit, but I've had it all to myself for most of the time.

For a couple of days, they did put this skinny nigger burglar in the cell with me. He said he was twenty-nine, though he looked ten years older than that to me, but maybe it was just the way those orange coveralls hung on him. He called himself Cool Cal.

One evening, we got to talking about things, though it wasn't easy 'cause I couldn't understand most of what he said--ya know how they talk. I told him that I was just praying that the Lord'd show me what I'd done wrong and what I needed to do for Him to deliver me from the devil.

"Shit," Cal said, "I knew when I was eight years old that there ain't no god, no good god and no bad god. There's just us here and we gotta make it on our own. You know what's the only difference between the two of us sitting in this cell and all those people in those classrooms and offices over at U.T. or at TVA?"

"No."

"You know why they're gonna be at some nice restaurant tonight, dressed in their Dockers or Levis and L.L. Bean sweaters, eatin' steak or some fuckin' tofu something while we eat some shit off a metal plate?"
"Well, we broke the law."

"Fuck no! It's luck, blind damn fuckin' luck. The only difference between us and them is who our parents were. It ain't got a goddamn thing to do with some god or workin' hard or anything else. They've just learned how to fuck each other and steal from one another legal, that's all."

The next morning they moved Cal out, and I kept thinkin' about what he'd said. A lot of people do seem to pretty much have it made right from the start, I thought. I realized that I've never felt lucky; I've always felt blessed. After all, the Bible never talks about luck. It talks about the Lord pouring blessings on His people. Then I remembered the question Job had asked: "Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?" I don't know. But, luck? Just luck? Blind luck can't be all there is or this whole world is doomed for sure.

There's this preacher who comes every Thursday afternoon to visit with any of the prisoners who wanna talk. Of course, I've always been glad to talk with a preacher.

Preacher Schneider—he introduced himself as the Reverend Martin Schneider—is one of the associate pastors at the biggest Lutheran church in Knoxville. I asked him how many churches he'd been the preacher at.

"This is my first parish," he said as he fumbled with a white piece of plastic stuck into the collar of his all
black priest's shirt. "I'm just twenty-six. I completed my
four years of seminary education only last May."

"Four years! I guess that just shows how much there is
to learn about the Bible."

He laughed a little, more like a cough really. "Well
yes, we studied the Bible quite extensively, but we also
studied history, Greek, psychology, and theology. And, of
course, before I entered seminary at Gettysburg, I received
my B.A. from Northwestern. There is indeed a lot to learn."

As he picked a piece of lint off the sleeve of his wool
jacket, he said, "I'm here to talk about whatever is on your
mind."

Neither one of us said anything for a minute. He was
looking around the cell, and I watched the light glare off
his pale face. I wasn't sure what I could say to him. But he
is a preacher.

Finally, I told him why I was there and about how it
seemed like the Lord had plumb deserted me, how none of it
made any sense. Then, I kinda laughed and said, "There's
this guy in here a few days ago who said God or Satan didn't
have anything to do with any of it. He said it was all just
a matter of luck."

Preacher Schneider suddenly leaned forward in his
chair. "Now, that's very interesting," he said as he brushed
back his light brown hair with a chubby hand. "Yes, that's
very interesting because there's a Canadian theologian who has actually done a great deal of work in that area. Of course, his paradigm is not framed in the same terminology. His reference is process, not capricious luck."

"Process?"

I noticed a hint of pink appearing on his cheeks. The pupils of his eyes were jitterbugging up and down, side to side. I leaned back in my chair.

"Yes. Because of the obvious vicissitudes in life and because of the equally obvious contradictory nature of much of the theological work done in the past, he postulates a process. God created a process and stands outside that process. God is unable to interfere directly in that process without destroying the creation itself. Therefore, though God is always there and changes stances at times in order to facilitate the process, humanity must bear the burden of constantly struggling, individually and collectively, to meet the challenges of life in a way consistent with our limited understanding of God."

"That is interesting," I said because I wasn't sure what to say.

His face softened again and the brightness left his eyes. "Uh, like I said, we can talk about whatever you want to talk about."
One of the jailers walked up and said that I had another visitor. Preacher Schneider looked a little disappointed, but I felt relieved to tell you the truth.

Through all the mumbo-jumbo, I knew what he was saying. He was saying basically the same thing that Cal had said--luck controlled our lives. Oh, he was allowing for a god. But that god couldn't do anything; so I'm on my own in this life, completely alone in this world.

We both stood up and shook hands. "Maybe we can visit with one another next week if you'd like," he said.

"That'd be fine."

He turned to leave, but stopped after taking a couple of steps. He turned to face me. "Would you like for us to have prayer together?" he asked as he looked at my feet.

"Sure," I said.

Then he fumbled in his jacket pocket for a moment before pulling out a little black book. "I think this has an excellent prayer for those incarcerated," he said as thumbed through the pages.

I can't remember what he read because I figured that it was Teresa and Lydia waitin' to see me; Teresa'd been to see me just about every day, sometimes bringing Lydia with her, and it'd usually been about that time of the day. I was disappointed when, instead of Teresa, they brought in Preacher Lambert.
"Hello, Burrell. How ya doin'?"

"Fine," I said.

"I've got some good news for ya and some bad news for ya," he said, a serious look on his face. "The bad news is that Teresa won't be able to come see ya today. The good news is that she won't be able to visit 'cause today she's startin' the second shift down at the Burlington plant in Crossville." And his false teeth clicked as he grinned real big.

He's an old man now, stooped over so he doesn't seem nearly as tall and with hair that's mostly gray. Some folks at church are gettin' a little worried about him, about his mind. Used to, he never forgot anything. Now, sometimes, he even forgets to zip up his pants. But he's still slim, still has those thick, callused hands and forearms rippling with muscles. And he's still got ice-hard blue eyes that glint some burning light when he talks about the devil. Those eyes flashed when I told him what Cal had said and they flashed even hotter when I explained as best I could what Preacher Schneider had said.

"It's bad enough when a thief's makin' excuses like that for hisself. O' course a lot of that kinda talk, that whole attitude, ain't nothing but the result of race mixin'. Never used to hear any kinda talk like that. But for a man that claims to be a preacher to say that the Lord God
Almighty don't do nothing in this here world! That ain't nothing but the pure work of Satan. Thank the Lord that He's given you and me the faith to know what a load of sheepdip all that is."

"Yeah, that's true," I said. But I didn't know. I only knew there was this jumble of faces and voices, verses and questions and questions swirling in my brain. My head felt like a hornet's nest full of anger, and I couldn't think anymore. I had to concentrate hard to hear the preacher's voice over the buzzing that seemed to spill out of my ears.

"Well, I wanted to get by to see ya and bring ya some good news. Did Teresa tell ya that Mrs. Phipps had a stroke? She's not doin' a bit good; I'm headed over to see her in Presbyterian Hospital....Let's pray together before I leave."

Preacher Lambert prayed for continued blessings on all of us, for faith and strength so all of us could withstand the devil's temptations. But mostly, he thanked the Lord, and the buzzing in my head began to quieten, like a wasp flying away in slowly enlarging circles. He thanked God for being our Heavenly Father. He thanked God for loving His people so much that He gave His only Son, Jesus. He thanked the Lord that His Holy Spirit is still at work in the world.

"Amen and amen," he said.
The preacher's been gone about two hours now, two hours that've been just like it's been for the last sixteen days--sitting here doing a lot of thinking, trying to figure things out. I've been trying to figure out why I wound up here. Why'd the Lord let this happen to me? All the people out there leading evil lives, not caring a thing about God's teachings, and I'm the one that all this happens to. It almost seems like Cal or Preacher Schneider could be right, especially when something that shouldn't make a bit of difference, like the size of a man's dick, plays such a big part. Maybe there is no god, or maybe God is so powerless that it makes no sense to try to talk to Him. Or maybe, it's just like Preacher Lambert and Momma's always said, Satan's powerful--maybe when we're weak, we let him be more powerful than God.

But luck? Aimlessness? I don't know. I don't know. I only know how much I want to be with my wife and daughter.

Moving to the window of my cell, I watch life go on around me, hazy through the dirty glass. Police cars come and go in the courtyard below. Cars and trucks are racing across the Tennessee River bridge to someplace or other. I can see the rooftop of the Hinckel plant and I-40 stretching away through the mountains, toward my home and family. A stiff breeze is pushing clouds across the sky, and I strain
to glimpse Daddy and Momma up there somewhere, to see Jesus in His heaven. But there are only dingy clouds wavering over dirty glass.

Then, I remember—Paul's letter to the Corinthians, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, then face to face." The buzzing in my brain seems distant, then is gone. The hairs on the back of my neck and at my temples twitch; I know I feel the Holy Spirit. I don't have to understand. I know.

Momma always said, "No matter what Satan does, we always got a Heavenly Father watching over us, Jesus loving us, the Holy Spirit leading us by the hand."

God is in His heaven. He has to be.

And forty miles up through those mountains, my wife and baby are waiting on me. Teresa and Lydia and me are gonna make it.
FLOWING through the sky,
    One trailing one,
They sail over the mountains.
Pointing, a cry,
    "Look! Look!"
Lodges empty.
    A village filled with awe,
We watch them,
    A prayer over camp.
Now gliding in great tangential circles
    framed in blue,
Glinting white and silver in the sun.
Then, the one to the East rising higher,
    higher.
In turn, the one to the South--to the center, rising,
the one to the West--to the center, rising,
the one to the North--to the center, rising.
Four hawks spiraling from us
    to the sky,
Rising,
    Disappearing before our eyes,
Carrying us all on
    Hawk wings.
HOLLOW WORDS, HEART LANGUAGE

The darkness poured cool air over the earth--cold to bodies used to muggy nights. Under the quilt her mother gave her that last day, they lay twenty yards from the road, fifteen yards into a sea of corn. Her two children, Martha and Jimmy, were sleeping, snuggled up to her on either side. But Mattie could not sleep for the children had fallen asleep crying, exhausted and cold. Mostly, they were afraid. She too was afraid--not for herself, but for them. They cried too often now. Gazing at the moon icy in the sky, he seemed a stranger, no longer Nvda, the relative she had watched in wonder as he slipped between mountain peaks to walk among the stars.

As weariness overcame her, she was not sure where she was or whether she was thinking or dreaming. She is in a spring night that now seems a far distant place; she is home, Cherokee country. The moon hangs over North Carolina's mountains like a brilliant disk, guides the way, lights their path, paints dancing, shadowy figures in the deep woods on both sides of the dirt road. She walks with Anna, one of her sisters, and two cousins, Dora and Shirley, down the hollow to McCloud's Crossroads Store.

It was there that she first saw him, as she stood outside holding the sack of cornmeal for her mother and sharing two Cokes with the other three girls. The other
three were busy flirting with two young men from up around Yellow Hill, but she stood a few feet apart, watching the night sky, listening to the distant voice of a mourning dove.

She felt his stare before she saw him. She twisted slightly toward that feeling, then turned her head down and to the left to glance over her shoulder. He and another young man were leaning against one of the store's porch posts. The other young man was talking animatedly, joking often and loudly. But he didn't seem to be listening to his laughing companion; he leaned against the post with his eyes fixed on her, a slim smile on his face. She quickly averted her eyes, but they were no longer interested in the night sky and very soon wandered back across her shoulder. Still, he stared. Still, that smile. She looked away, but not so quickly this time. As her eyes again began to wander, her heart jumped when she realized that he had stepped from the porch to walk directly toward her.

"Hullo, my name's George Austin. Whut's yore name?"
"Mattie," she mumbled.
"Pardon," he said as he leaned forward slightly. "I didn't quite catch that."

Mattie thought she smelled the faint scent of alcohol. She repeated her name a little louder.
"Oh, Mattie. I've always thought that wuz a purty name. You live round here?"

"Yes," she replied, then she hurried over to where the other girls were saying goodbye to the boys from Yellow Hill. As the four girls started up the hollow together, George yelled at her and asked, "You live up that holler?"

Mattie didn't answer; she kept walking without looking back as the other girls gave her looks bursting with curiosity. Shortly, they bombarded her with questions about the young man at the store. Giggling their way to the cabin at the head of the hollow, the four of them talked about the boys from Yellow Hill and the boy from the store.

That night, as she had so many times in the past, fifteen year old Mattie lay awake while the others slept around her. But this night she was not watching stars fly slowly across the dome of night or heavy, gray clouds crawl over and down the black mountains; this night she thought only of a brash boy named George. The memory of the liquor-breath bothered her--but he was so beautiful. When she finally did sleep, she dreamed of sparkling blue eyes, an irresistible smile, and a shock of sandy blond hair atop a slender body walking towards her in the moonlight.

As the sun eased out of the distant end of the cornfield, the expanding brightness woke her. Mattie drew
her children closer and tucked the quilt around them
tighter. She would let them sleep a little longer before
waking them to another long day's march. Digging deep into
the pocket of her faded, cotton dress, she pulled out a
small, snap purse and counted their money once again. When
she had laid that money on the counter of the bus station in
Muncie and asked for three tickets to Bryson City, the
ticket agent had laughed at her, saying, "Honey, that money
might get you there. Ya wanna leave those kids with me?" he
asked, laughing again.

So they marched and she thought of Grandpa, of sitting
on his knee as a little girl of five or six. She remembered
her child's wonder that another human body could be so
creased and bent by the seasons; with pudgy fingers, she
would trace the deep crevices of his face and, as she held
his hand, she marveled at a hand so large, at skin so thinly
veiling bones and purple veins. She still felt the awe of
being that close to one so ancient, one who had found a
place apart from years strung like beads, a place of quiet
amidst the clamor of tragedy. Coming from that place, she
hears his voice, soft and even, calling her Guque Usdi—
Little Quail.

Grandpa tells her that he had walked across the
mountains to visit relatives in Talassee. The soldiers came
only two days later and took everyone away. Anyone who
resisted, even hesitated, was dragged from home and lands. At bayonet point, they were marched to a camp at the white settlement of Calhoun to be held until the roundup of the people was complete. Grandpa says that he, like most of the people, arrived there with only the clothes on his back. And in late summer, they began the long march away from their mountains.

She woke the children as the sun cleared the tops of the corn. She wiped the sleepy from their eyes, brushed their hair with her hand, kissed them on their foreheads. From a flour sack, she pulled a quart mason jar of water and two biscuits, each holding a slice of fried salt pork. As the children gobbled down their biscuits and pork, she took a long, slow drink. She wouldn't eat that day.

At first, it felt good to be up and walking, to feel the sun's warm rays permeate muscles, blood, and bone. But too soon, her welcomed rays changed to searing, shimmering waves that rose in the dust of the road in front of them and danced across the tops of the flat cornfields. Too soon, Martha was crying; she was hot and tired, and she wanted to go home. So Mattie picked up the four-year-old and they trudged on, Jimmy walking close beside her, rarely complaining. She knew they had to go on.
They walked mile after mile without seeing another human being. Only the crows drifting on thermal waves, calling to one another, broke the monotony. Occasionally, one would land on a not-too-distant stalk, looking in their direction. She watched and listened closely, but crow had no words for her.

Around noon, she heard the rumble of a motor behind them and, looking back, saw a swirl of dust moving toward them. As it billowed closer, she could make out a truck leading the dust cloud. The truck slowed, coming to a stop as it drew beside them. A curious look crossed the faces of the old couple in the cab, but she had long ago become accustomed to those looks. Finally, the old woman poked the man in the ribs; he grunted, then said, "Ma'am, would you like a ride? We're headed to Cincinnati to see our granddaughter. She just had a baby boy."

"Yes, thank you," she replied.

As Mattie lifted the children up onto the back of the '26 Ford flatbed, the old woman leaned out of the window, saying, "Dear, we've got some nice apples up here. Do the children like apples?"

"Yes."

"Well here," she said, holding out a sack, "pick out some for the children."
She pulled two big, red apples out of the bag, then held it out to the old woman.

"No, no. Get 'em a couple of 'em a piece and take a couple for yourself."

She pulled four more apples from the sack, handed it back as she thanked the woman, then climbed onto the truck. She sat between the children with her arms around their shoulders, all of them leaning against the back of the cab, eating apples.

She felt better; she had eaten, and her children, who had smacked their lips eating the apples, now leaned into her sides, their heads lolled onto her breasts, sleeping peacefully. And the miles seemed to race by.

Soon, small woodlands and occasional farmhouses interrupted the endless cornfields. But the land still stretched out beyond the eye's ability to see; it dived into the blue pool of the sky without the slightest ripple to mark that merging. This land had never spoken to her, but she could not believe it was voiceless. Yet, even now, as she listened again, it only lay hard and flat, mute beneath cornfields, barns, and houses.

The air rushing around them was hot, treated by the same sun that was broiling everything, boring her heat into the top of Mattie's head. But Mattie didn't curse the sun,
for she was only doing what she was meant to do. They could endure the heat.

Mattie didn't curse the land for not speaking to her. When they had moved into this country, she had wondered if perhaps it was her ears that simply could no longer hear. But now, she thought it was the whites; perhaps they had managed to cut the tongue out of Mother Earth.

Mattie didn't even curse George anymore. She cursed herself for being so naive and foolish, for not listening to Grandma; she remembered the dark, worried look that had descended on Grandma's face the morning that George had driven up to their cabin. She also remembered thinking that he looked even more beautiful than he had the night before--those blue eyes, that blond hair.

All that day they sat out under the big willow next to the spring. George's smile was infectious and he was funny; he talked a lot and they laughed a lot. And right away, he was calling her "Darlin'."

Late in the afternoon he said, "Darlin', we oughta go fer a ride. Ya wanna take a spin?"

None of her family had cars. She knew of very few people who owned cars. She thought perhaps that she remembered riding in a car once before. Without hesitating, she said yes and then they were in the car with the wind
chasing her long, black hair like streamers, the air roiling with dust behind them.

It bothered her that the first stop that George made was at Oren Brown's place, one of the local bootleggers. But George was such a beautiful man, and he knew about things she could only imagine. And she was in his car, and it was slick and shiny in the brilliant sunlight, moving fast to some other place. She even took a small sip of the corn liquor, then laughed with George after she stopped gagging and spitting.

They drove around for hours, ending up in Bryson City for hamburgers, Cokes, and fried pies. And for all those hours, George talked: He was from Kentucky where his daddy had owned a big farm, but the county took it for back taxes when his father died; all George got out of it was this car and a couple of hundred dollars. (Two hundred dollars!, she thought.) He didn't have any brothers or sisters because his mother died when he was only three months old and his father never remarried. So, at nineteen, being footloose and fancy free as he put it, he decided to drive on down to North Carolina to visit his cousins.

He told her about the farmhouse on the homeplace—white with two stories and electricity, a pump in the kitchen, even an indoor toilet. He told her about radios with country music flowing out of them all the way from
Nashville. They owned two, one of which he kept in his own room, but he had given them away because he could always buy another one when he settled down. Soon, when he settled down he was going to have another place like that.

He told her about cities like Knoxville and Asheville, cities of long streets lined with bustling stores where a lady could buy any kind of dress she might want. For a moment, as George droned on, Mattie saw herself in one of those stores. She picked out a dress, bright blue or yellow maybe, trimmed in lace. She picked out a matching hat and shoes—high-heels, only high-heels would do. She counted out cash money and walked out of the store looking just like the women she’d seen in the Sears and Roebuck Catalog.

They drove back up to the cabin late that night, almost midnight. He said, "Well, goodnight, Darlin'."

"Goodnight," she said. But before she could turn to step out of the car, he grabbed her, pulling her to him, mashing her breasts tight against his chest, covering her lips with his lips. She pushed him away slightly; her eyes were wide and her breath came in a gasp like surfacing from a deep dive. But then she put one arm around him, lifting the other hand to run her fingers through that blond hair as they kissed again.
As she walked to the house, he called after her, "Mattie. Mattie, I jist think I might love you." Then, he started the car and was gone.

When she walked in, Grandma was still awake, sitting in her rocker next to the fireplace. Grandma looked up, the worry and displeasure still clouding her face. Without saying anything, she looked back into the fire, puffing hard on her pipe.

Mattie climbed quietly into the loft, slipped off her dress, then tiptoed between the bodies of sleeping sisters and brothers to her pallet beneath the open window. Lying under the window filled with a dark mountain, its forested top ragged against a starry sky, she did not sleep. That beautiful boy loved her.

Shortly after turning onto a main road, the old man pulled in at a truck stop. They both slid out; the old woman headed for the restroom at a slow trot as the old man pumped gas. After jumping down, Mattie helped Martha down, letting Jimmy jump by himself because he wanted to. Then, they followed the old woman.

When they came out of the restroom, the old couple was standing beside their truck where two paper bags sat on the hood. As she and the children walked up, the old woman handed her one of the bags, saying, "Here, dear. We were
hungry and thought you might be hungry too." The bag contained three sandwiches with thick slices of ham, lathered with mayonnaise, topped with lettuce and tomato slices. The old woman reached into the other bag, pulled out a Coke for her and two Orange Crushes for the children. "We know young'uns and we know they love orange soda. And we figured most folks like some dessert," she said as she handed each of them a Milky Way.

"My name's Helen Liston and this is my husband, Lawrence. What are your names?" asked the woman.

"My name's Mattie and this is Martha and Jimmy."

"Like I said, we're going to Cincinnati," the old man said.

"That's fine," Mattie said.

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Home. We're gain' home." As she said it, she was surprised by the elation that filled her, overwhelmed her.

Climbing onto the back of the truck, she thought of Grandpa's story again. He lived in Oklahoma for only a couple of years before deciding that he had to go home—he had to go back to their mountains. He traveled by night for three months before walking barefoot and half-starved into his mother's cabin. But he was home.

She had not been home in seven years--seven years.
George had showed up at their place day after day, driving up early in the morning, spending the whole day with her. Her mother and grandmother were always hospitable, feeding him meal after meal, but they were quiet, very quiet. George never noticed, however; he always seemed to have so much that he needed to say.

They spent most of their time in the car driving, though George wasn't interested in seeing the countryside. He liked to be in the machine, moving, talking about all the things that he was going to have some day. They even drove to Asheville one day where George showed her the streets and stores he'd told her about. He took her into one store that sold everything from underwear to hardware and bought her a pair of silk stockings--her first pair.

Late that evening, they pulled into what had become "their place" just off the road running up her hollow, behind a stand of cedars. George turned off the engine and took a long pull from another of Oren Brown's Mason jars. Hattie was expecting their usual hour or so spent in the car. These were those rare times when George had little to say, but still she did not speak--only occasional words of protest. She had no words for his blond hair and blue eyes, no words for times of intense curiosity and fear like a lurking shadow, for heated groping and tangled bodies, for
George's hoarse words of desire and her dreams. She had no words for all his words.

But this night, after only a few kisses and caresses, George sat up behind the wheel, gazing into the forest. During those moments when he didn't speak, she could hear the wind brushing through the tops of the cedars and the whippoorwill calling like a lonely child. She could again see the moon as he hovered over them, touching her heart, but not suffocating her as George did when he rocked over her in the dark.

Then George spoke, "Darlin', we've been again' together for nigh on three weeks now. An' I love you an' you love me, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, hell, we oughta git married. Whatta ya say? Let's git married. Let's drive on over to Bryson City an' git married tomorrow."

"T-tomorrow?!" she stammered, "I'll need to talk to Momma an' Grandma."

"Aright, day after tomorrow then."

She felt even stronger the strange mixture of excitement and fear that she had felt their first night in the cedar thicket. Her heart pounded as she said, "Okay. But, I dunno o' any places empty round here now. We kin live with my family 'til sumthin' empties out or 'til ya kin
build us a place. Course, it'll be more crowded than yo're used to," she said, feeling heat rise in her face as her mind showed her side-by-side pictures of her home and George’s homeplace.

"Ah, hell, we ain't gonna live round here. Hell no, we're gonna live in Kentucky. There ain't no work round here and it's too damn lonesome. No, darlin', we're gonna live in Kentucky where there's sum people an' sum work."

"But, I'm Cherokee, she said. Suddenly, there wasn't enough oxygen in the air; she breathed quick and deep, and her heart thumped against her ribs. But still, she felt light-headed. "Are there Ind'an people in Kentucky?"

"I know whut ya are. Sure yo're 'n injun, but yo're white too. Ya told me that one o' yore granddaddies wuz white, right? So, yo're white too. 'Sides, that don't matter nomore nohow. Why, I read where a couple o' years ago, 1924 I think it wuz, they made ya'll regular American cit'zens, jist like the rest o' us."

She didn't tell George that, when her family had heard that news, her mother had scowled, saying, "We don't need that. We never asked fer that."

When Mattie told her mother and grandmother they were going to marry, her mother only shook her head, saying, "He'll take ya away."
As she always did at home, Grandma spoke in Cherokee, asking, "Dohv hia tsaduli?"

"'Cause I love him," she answered in English.

Grandma was silent for a moment as she looked into Mattie’s eyes. Mattie looked away quickly, but not before noticing a dullness in her Grandmother’s eyes and a deepening of the creases on the old woman’s face.

"Vv," Grandma said softly, "Vv. Asehno gado holga hia ahwina? Gado holga dichvsdi?"

"I know him an' I know it ain't gonna be easy. But I love him an' he loves me."

"Hia ahwina uduli uwenvsvi hega, vv?"

"Yes. But it's jist 'cause there's more good jobs 'round his home in Kentucky."

"Ayonega."

"But my Grandpa Foster wuz white."

"Vv, aquoltsviga," Grandma said. "Unega unegalvi uwakahvi, asehno udantogi tlayigi doyu unega. Hia ahwina unega udantogi; agigage tsoudantogi."

"Oh, Grandma, there's no such thing as white hearts an' red hearts. Hearts is hearts an' people is people. Grandpa Foster an' George an' me an' you all got the same color hearts. An' George an' me love each other."

Her grandmother's words merely drifted into the spring sky, unable to intrude on Mattie's silk-stocking dream. Two
days later, she was taking the quilt from her mother's hands, waving goodbye to Grandma, sisters and brothers as the car pulled away from the cabin.

Seven years ago--that was seven years ago.

Mattie fell asleep as the sun slid under the vault of the sky and the earth cooled. The miles sped by as she slept; she awoke unsure of where they were, but she could tell they were on the outskirts of a large city by the many fine houses stretching away on both sides of the highway. She twisted around carefully, so as not to wake the children, and ahead could see the electric daylight of the city and its great buildings looming like lifeless mountains. Though the night sky was veiled by that artificial curtain, she guessed it was around midnight.

Soon, the truck was slowly making its way down concrete hollows. With the frequent stopping and starting, Jimmy woke up to stare wide-eyed at the towering buildings. After enough twisting and turning to confuse Mattie thoroughly, the old man turned into a parking lot laid before a sprawling, red-brick building; it reminded her of pictures she'd seen of fancy buildings in Europe.

The old couple got out and he said, "Well, here we are--Cincinnati. Are you folks ready to change horses?"
Mattie looked around. "But, this is the train station," she said. "I ain't sure I gotta enough fer us to ride the bus an' I know it costs more to ride the train--but, we kin find our way to the bus station."

"You're not going to do any such thing!" the old woman said. "Listen, dear, we don't know exactly where you're headed! but we want to help if we can. The three of you will be a lot more comfortable on the train and I'll bet the children will get a kick out of riding it." Turning to the children, she asked, "Have you ever ridden a train?"

Jimmy mumbled, "No." But Martha was too busy yawning and rubbing her eyes to pay any attention.

"None o' us have ever ridden a train," Mattie answered for them.

"Well then, it'll be a treat for all of you. Now, let's go in there and see if we can work this out."

In a few minutes, they were standing next to the steps of a passenger car with three tickets to Bryson City in Mattie's hand and all of her money still in her pocket--the old couple hadn't let her spend any of it. They said that she would need her money to take care of the children.

Lawrence said, "Goodbye," patted both of the children on the tops of their heads, and pressed a nickel into each child's hand.
Helen touched Mattie's arm, saying gently, "We sure hope you get home okay. You take good care of yourself and these babies." Then, she bent over to kiss Jimmy and Martha on their cheeks.

The three of them sat on a train for the first time, next to a window where they could see the old couple still standing on the platform. As the train began to creep out of the station, the old couple waved goodbye, and the three of them waved back, the children waving vigorously. The children quickly turned away to consider other fascinations around them, but she leaned against the window pane to watch the old couple until they turned to walk slowly away. For the first time in years, the tears welled in her eyes and spilled soundlessly down her cheeks. Suddenly, she realized how desperately she wanted to see her mother and, especially, her grandmother.

The train chugged across the Ohio River and quickly picked up speed in the countryside. Within an hour, the children were rocked to sleep by the rhythmic swaying of the car, lulled to sleep by the monotonous sound of wheels against rails.

They were rumbling through rolling hills and ahead she could see the outline of Kentucky's mountains, which grew more distinct as, far to the east, the sun moved beneath the sky vault, gradually becoming an expanding, bright crescent.
peeping over dark green peaks. To the south was her hollow, but first she had to pass through those hollow mountains—mountains whose insides had been ripped out, mountains with festering wounds. The wounds oozed a black-bloody flux into the waters; the streams reminded her of rivulets of blood from a carcass lying in the sun. To the South was hope, but first she had to pass through those sad mountains that she remembered too well.

She and George had spent their wedding night in a tourist cabin just north of Knoxville. After cumming for the second time in less than an hour, George had rolled off her onto his back, both arms flung straight out to the sides. She turned onto her side, cuddled up to him with her head on his right shoulder, her arm draped over his chest, and her leg over his leg drawing herself closer to him. She kissed his shoulder, his neck, his cheek.

"I love you, George," she said.

"I love you too," George said. Then he breathed deeply, sighed "Whew," and was asleep immediately, snoring sporadically.

But the bed was too soft and the room seemed so lonely that Mattie did not fall asleep until the early hours of the morning. As the sun's early rays filtered through the
Venetian blinds, faintly lighting the room, George's hand between her thighs woke her.

Late that afternoon, after another long, dusty day on the road, they arrived in Corbin and drove straight to the wholesale grocery company owned by George's Uncle Horace. Before they even entered the building, out on the sidewalk, she was aware of heads turning, eyes narrowing like a spyglass being twisted to focus on some distant object.

As they walked through the door, George saw his uncle and walked directly to him, saying loudly, "Uncle Horace, how are ya?"

His uncle turned, smiled in recognition, then replied in an even louder voice, "George. Well, I'll be damned. Where the hell ya been, boy?"

"Oh, I've been to Carolina. Figured as how with Pap an' the place gone, I might as well visit Uncle Jack. An' guess whut...I got married down there. This here's my wife, Mattie," he said, turning aside and raising one hand toward Mattie, who was standing to his side and a step back.

Uncle Horace's smile dropped and his eyes narrowed on Mattie. "Yeah?" he said quietly.

Even George noticed the abrupt change, so he stammered, "Uh, uh...she's a Cherokee injun." Then he said, "Mattie, this here's my Uncle Horace."
Mattie said, "Hullo," always looking slightly down and to the side.

Still staring directly at her, Horace responded only with "Howdy."

A few moments passed in which Mattie was aware that, all around her, heads were still turning and eyes were still staring. But George could never stand an absence of words, much less this awkward speechlessness, so he quickly said, "Listen, Uncle Horace, I need me a job an' a place to live. I wuz figurin' maybe ya could use sum help round this big place. Ya know I'm a hard worker."

Uncle Horace finally turned his attention back to George. "Yeah, I know that, George. We kin probably work sumthin' out. Matter o' fact," he said, talking loudly again, "I don't know if ya knowed it, but yore daddy owed me money. An' ya know, a debt's a debt--it's gotta be paid off. Whutta ya say if I put ya to work here an' take sumthin' outta yore pay ever week 'til we're even?"

George looked surprised, then he said, "Well, I reckon that'd be awright. How much did Pap owe ya anyways?"

"Oh, I dunno. I'd have to look it up. But looky here, I jist hadda sharecropper's cabin come open out on the old Daughty place. I jist bought the place last year an' that sorry sonafabitch that wuz alivin' there wouldn't work in a pie factory. He wouldn't do shit, so I run his sorry ass
off. Ya'll could live in that place. Ya know where it is—only 'bout three miles outta town right on the Manchester road."

"Yeah, I know where it is," George replied. "Well, I'd let ya live there fer...say, three dollars a month an' ya could git yore groceries here fer jist a little over whut I have to give fer 'em. Fer that rent an' with a good deal on yore beans an' cornbread, I figure if I hold out a fourth of yore pay ever week 'til yore debt's paid, ya still oughtta make it okay. Whutta ya think?"

"Well, I reckon that'd work," George answered slowly. "'Course now, I can't pay ya no more 'n nobody else," Horace added quickly. "That jist wouldn't be fair."

When the train stopped in Corbin to take on passengers headed south, Mattie thought of that sharecropper's cabin only a few miles from where the locomotive sat hissing and smoking. That house had not been too different from the one in which she had always lived. She knew it was not nearly as nice as George's homeplace. But he never really seemed to notice; he continued to talk as he always had about what they would have and do in the future. "Jist as soon as I git Pap's debt paid off," he would say.

Nine months after moving into the sharecropper's shack, with thick, low clouds spitting snow into gusting winds, she
quietly groaned Jimmy into the world, into the hands of the only other person in the house—old Mrs. Osborne. George had worked that day, then gone squirrel hunting. He came home with two squirrels and a quart jar of moonshine to a surprise, his blond, blue-eyed son nursing at Mattie's breast.

"Now, I know he's a little earlier than ya'll expected 'em, but he's doin' fine. Mattie's doin' fine too. An' I know whut I'm atalkin' 'bout cause I've helped hunderds of babies git into this here world. Ya gotta healthy boy an' ya shore have gotta strong woman. Look at him, George, ain't he fine?"

"Yes'm, he is fine."

"I already got ya'll sum biscuits in," she said, "an' if you'll dress them squirrels real quick, I'll fry 'em up an' make y'uns sum sawmill gravy 'fore ya take me home."

As she cooked, Mrs. Osborne went on and on about how Jimmy looked just like George, "Yessir, that Jimmy boy looks jist like ya, 'ceptin his color's jist a tad darker." Then, smiling broadly and looking squarely at George, she added, "A little feller's gotta take sumthin' after his momma ya know."

A little over two years later, Mrs. Osborne came to their house again. And again, George was at work, loading flour onto freight cars or filling orders to be delivered.
The old woman watched over Mattie as best she could while keeping Jimmy occupied in the other room. She was in the other room when Mattie squeezed Martha onto a cornshuck mattress. Mrs. Osborne heard the baby's cry and hurried into the bedroom to find Martha, splotched with blood and crying, lying on her mother's stomach.

"Well, my god, honey," the old woman sputtered.

Mattie reassured her, "We're both doin' good. If ya'd jist cut the cord fer us, we'll do fine."

As Mrs. Osborne was cleaning up Martha, she kept shaking her head and saying over and over that Martha was the "spittin' image" of her mother, just like Jimmy was the "spittin' image" of his father. And she was right, Martha had thick, black hair, eyes almost black, and a dark complexion.

Only two days after Martha was born, George stumbled home with a moonshine slur in his speech. He'd been celebrating, he said. He was more excited than she'd seen him in a long time.

"Guess what, Darlin'," he said as he grabbed her up and they almost fell as he tried to twirl her around. "Uncle Horace told me that next week I'll have Pap's debt paid off. Now, we kin really do sum good. An' we won't have to jist scrape by while we do it. How'd ya like to have a new
dress?” he asked as he picked up Jimmy and twirled around, both of them laughing. Mattie almost smiled.

The euphoria was short-lived; two weeks later, George was out of a job. Uncle Horace laid George off, replacing him with Horace's own son. After Horace deducted what they owed for groceries, there was little left of George's last payday.

The engine lurched forward and cars up and down the line rattled together. Then, the rhythmic swaying and hypnotic clackety-clack settled over them again. Martha was licking a big, red and green striped sucker, sharing it with the small doll that Mattie had bought from the porter who came through the car selling tobacco, snacks, and trinkets. With the little pistol she bought him, Jimmy was firing at some enemy pursuing the train. She winced when he told her he was killing Indians.

She glanced out of the window, only a glance because she didn't want to see Horace Austin's business sitting beside the tracks or any other part of Corbin. She was glad low clouds now crowded in, bringing fog and a steady drizzle, limiting visibility. She didn't want to see Corbin or see anybody else looking at her and her children. She wanted only to move faster, faster to the south and out of
Kentucky, then to the east. She remembers that to the South is hope.

She glanced out of the window again and it was another day.

The ridgetops were imprisoned by a heavy fog that also trapped the smoke drifting from dozens of chimneys; together they spread thick and low over the treetops like a dull blanket--gray with black swirled across it. The bare trees gleamed wet-black in the dim daylight and moisture dripped in slow syncopation from gray rocks and gray houses scattered across the sides of the ridges. Wedged into the bottom of the hollow was a creek rolling high and muddy, and a narrow, gooey road--early spring in Harlan County, Kentucky.

The cold drizzle wet them both to the skin before they could finish unloading the truck. They were moving into a company house because George had a job in the Tuggle Mine Number Two. This house was different; it was dark and dirty--grimy, sooty dirt--and she could feel eddies of cold, damp air whenever she passed by a door or window. She wondered how well the newspapers plastered all over the walls would keep out the cold when freezing winds were blowing. But, as she helped George set up their bed, he was optimistic.
He said, "The foreman says that if a man's willin' to work hard, he kin make a purty good livin' since ya git paid by the ton. He said if a man really watches his p's an' q's, he oughtta be able to put sum back. I figure I'll have to work this job fer maybe a year, year an' ahalf, then we'll be ready to look fer our own place. Ya know I'm a hard worker, so, in 'bout a year, year an' ahalf, we'll be lookin' fer a little farm."

Mattie knew that George was a hard worker.

The next morning, after George left for the mine, Mattie took the children with her to the company store. Although a light, smoky haze still hung over the hollow, the sky beyond was blue and the sun was warm.

The little bell attached to the inside-top of the front door jangled as they entered the store. The men standing around the walls and the men sitting in straight-back chairs around the heating stove stopped talking and all eyes stared at her and her children. They walked to the counter where the clerk and another man stopped in mid-laughs to look them over closely.

Mattie hesitated, then said, "My husband jist started in mine number two today. I need to git a few things an' put it on his pay."

"I'm sorry," the clerk said, "but ya can't do that 'til I git his paperwork. That'll take at least a week."
"Oh," Mattie said as she wondered what she was going to feed her children for the next week.

She was turning to leave when the clerk asked, "Whut are you anyway?"

She couldn't believe she'd heard him right, so she stammered, "Whut...Whut'd ya say?"

"Whut are ya?," the clerk repeated.

"I'm a Cherokee Ind'an."

"Ooh. Well, I kin see that 'un in yore arms is injun, but whut's he?," he asked as he pointed at Jimmy.

She looked directly at the clerk, "He's my son. He's an Ind'an too."

Mattie took Jimmy's hand, turned, and walked quickly out of the store. But as they passed through the doorway, she heard the clerk talking loudly.

"Well boys, whutta ya think o' that? First, the damned niggers an' now injuns. I'm a sumbitch if goddamn coloreds ain't atakin' over the coalfields!" From the men around the walls and in the chairs, she heard a quiet chorus of "Yeps."

As the months passed, she could feel George change. She saw a fish caught in a tuna net, an unwanted fish gasping its life away, struggling against bonds too strong to be broken. She had seen pictures of "worthless" fish dangling from tuna nets and she sees George changing.
Something had happened to George in the mines. A dark shadow, as real as the coal-dust cloak that covered him after a shift in the mine, descended over him. He was drunk more and more often, every weekend all weekend long after a while. Then, he was drunk during the week. He no longer was interested in hunting, so they had meat on the table far less often. George came home late to shout at her because the food was cold and there was no meat. He was not interested in the children, except to yell at them for being too loud or for crying for more food. He was not interested in her, except late at night when he crawled into their bed grimy, smelling of sweat and liquor, mumbling about love and need. George was not even interested in talking; as the months passed into one year, then two years, more and more, he was drunk. He dangled by a strand of alcohol from a net she was just beginning to recognize, a net woven into tight little squares like the maze of connections in a “white” brain, darker and far more vast than the labyrinth of tunnels beneath the mountains.

Mattie felt herself and her children being entangled; she felt herself gasping for air. And, in her heart, she cursed the white brains that had woven the net. So one night when George came home drunk once again, when he slipped into bed and pressed his smelly body against hers, when he ran his rough hand across her belly to knead her breast, she was
angry. When he whispered love and need, she was angry because she felt that too. She was angry because, after several years of marriage, she needed too and he never noticed.

"Quit it!" she said as she shoved him away. She rolled out of bed, slipped her dress over her head, and walked into the kitchen.

Behind her, George was clumsily jerking his pants on as he yelled after her, "Hey, where ya gain'? What's the matter with ya anyway?"

As she stood looking out of the kitchen window, he walked up behind her, put his arms around her, pulled her tight against him, kissed the back of her neck. "Now, Darlin', whut's the matter? Come on back to bed an' I'll make it better," he said as he ground his groin against her ass.

She twisted away from him. "George, I said quit it!"

"Okay now, whut the hell's the matter with ya?"

"Nothin'. I jist want ya to leave me alone."

"Leave ya alone! Hell, woman, we're married. I don't have to leave ya alone." He grabbed her by the wrist and said, "By God, it's time fer bed."

She twisted out of his grasp. "Goddammit, George, leave me alone an' go to bed. There's too much, jist too much. If
ya don't straighten yore ass up, me an' the kids is gonna leave."

Out of nowhere, George's fist smashed into Mattie's face, sending her back and down. She landed beside the cook stove, on her back with her head and shoulders against the wall, her right arm draped over the wood box behind the stove. Blood began trickling down her nose from a small cut in her eyebrow. In shock, she looked up at George standing over her. They had had many disagreements over the years, many heated arguments in the last few months, but George had never acted like he might hit her.

Now, he stood over her with bulging eyes and a stammering mouth, "Mattie, I-I'm sorry. I-I-I'm sorry, Mattie."

She heard a sniffle and looking to her right, between the back of the stove and the wall, she saw Jimmy standing in the doorway, runny-nosed and wide-eyed. "Jimmy, go back to bed. Go back to bed, son," she said gently. He turned and walked back to the room that was both the living room and a bedroom for him and Martha.

She looked up at George. She could feel beads of sweat forming on her forehead, on her back, between her breasts. She could feel heat sweeping her body. But the source of that heat was not emanating from the stove; it was rising from within her own body, a flashover in a forest fire. She
saw George standing over her and the sweat began to slip slowly down her forehead, trickle into the small of her back, ooze across her stomach. Then, she felt wood beneath her right palm, a stick of sweetgum about the size of a man's forearm.

She leaped up at George, swinging the stick with all her strength. She waded into him, holding her club with both hands and swinging furiously, putting all of her weight into every stroke, constantly advancing and raining blows on him from every direction. She said nothing and neither did George—except for an "Oow! Shit!" after the first two licks landed. The only sounds were her grunts of exertion with each swing of her weapon and the thud of the stick hitting back, arms, or stomach, the thwack of wood against skull.

Her attack was too swift and overwhelming; all George could do was throw up his arms, jerking them up and down in a futile attempt to protect himself as he retreated slowly toward the kitchen door. Finally, he turned and, with his hands and arms over his head and Mattie in hot pursuit, he ran for the back door.

Mattie stopped at the door and watched George disappear into the woods. She slowly pushed the door closed, then turned, exhausted, toward the bedroom, dropping the sweetgum stick in the middle of the kitchen floor. Without undressing, she threw herself onto the bed and slept.
Early the next morning, she awoke with a start. George was sitting on the side of the bed, pulling on his work boots. As she raised herself on one elbow, George twisted to look at her.

"Mattie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know ya are, George."

"This is it. I'm gonna straighten up, Darlin'."

"Yo're gonna have to, George. Nuff's e'nuff. I've had 'bout all I kin stand." She paused as she noticed the large purple oval on his left forearm and the ragged line of split skin that began three inches over his right eye and disappeared into his hairline. With her fingertips, she brushed his hair away from the cut. Then looking him in the eyes, she said evenly, "Oh, George, I love ya. You oughtta know I love ya. But I'm sumbody too; I ain't jist yore ol' horse or dawg. My momma weren't treated like this an' I ain't never been treated like this b'fore in my life. I love ya, George, but this better be it. Me an' yore children deserve better 'n ya've give us the past couple o' years."

"I swar, things is gonna be different, Mattie," he said as he took her hand.

She patted the back of his hand, saying, "Let me git up an' fix ya sum breakfast an' dress that cut b'fore ya go to work."
After George left for work, she sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, running her hand back and forth over the worn, oak tabletop, wondering. Wondering how her life had gotten so tangled. Wondering if her husband could straighten up. Even wondering if she really cared anymore--could it ever really be different with these people?

She hears Grandma's voice, a redbird's voice in spring, sweet and clear. Strawberries!

First Man and First Woman lived together in harmony for some time. But then, they began to quarrel; who knows the reason, two-leggeds simply disagree, argue. Finally, First Woman decided to leave, turned her face to the East and began walking. After a while, First Man walked after her, but she stayed steadily ahead of him. The Provider met First Man on the path and asked him if he was still angry with his wife.

"No," First Man replied.

"Would you like to have her back?"

"Yes."

The Provider caused huckleberries to appear along the trail First Woman was following, but she walked on. She walked past the blackberries that were growing along her way. She ignored several other kinds of berries and a tree loaded with red service berries. Then, The Provider placed a
patch of strawberries, the first ever, directly in First Woman's path. Kneeling, she picked several and began to eat. As she ate, she happened to face the West and at once her thoughts were of her husband. The more she thought, the more she desired him. So, she gathered as many strawberries as she could and started walking to the West. They met on the trail and First Man received her with kindness. They went home together.

Strawberries! Mattie rushed to the pantry, stretched on her tiptoes to reach the top shelf, running her hand behind the green beans she had canned last year. There, there it was—the old baking powder can. As she pulled it down, she knocked a jar of beans from the shelf; in a small explosion, glass and beans splattered over the kitchen. But she ignored the mess, popping the top open, pouring the contents into her hand as the children ran into the room.

"Momma, are ya okay?," Jimmy asked.
She poked her right index finger through the coins in her left hand. She thought she might have just enough.
"Ya'll git yore shoes on."
"Where we goin'?"
"Kin we go barefoot?," Martha pleaded.
"No, the ground's still not warm 'nuff. Now, git yore stuff on. We're goin' to the store."
Jimmy's eyes opened wide as he asked, "Whut 'bout this mess?"

"We're leavin' it fer now."

They walked down to the store--Mattie walking so fast that Martha, suspended from her mother's hand, moved in bounds, her toes touching the ground only occasionally. Mattie bought seven strawberry sets and a small jar of bright red enamel.

When they got home, she grabbed an old case knife and went out behind the house. Her eyes searched for the right spot, a place where light and shade would be just right. Finding it, she dropped to her knees and clawed at the ground with her knife. She dug out a small patch, working the ground with the knife, breaking up clods between her hands. After preparing the soil, she carefully tucked in the sets.

Standing up, she looked at her work. She remembers. She ran into the house, found a sack of George's tobacco, and ran back out to the strawberry patch. She sprinkles tobacco over the Earth.

Back in the kitchen, she cut a snippet of her hair. With thread and a twig, she made a small brush. Pulling her collection of odds and ends dishes from the shelf, she painted bright red strawberries on the side of every cup,
along the edge of every plate, and placed them in the sun to dry. Only then did she clean up the kitchen.

That evening, Mattie and the children walked toward the mine to meet George. She prays that he will be walking home. About halfway, they saw him ahead and Martha and Jimmy ran to him. With a big, bright smile, he kneeled to greet them and they threw their arms around his neck. Prying the lid from the lard can he carried for a lunch pail, he pulled out two horehound sticks, which the children immediately began to lick and suck. As she reached them, he handed her a small framed painting; peeking between the limbs of a hemlock, edged by thready streaks of clouds, the bright full moon beamed over dark mountains. They walked home together.

When they sat down for supper, George lifted his plate, then his cup, and asked, "Whut's this?"

"Momma did that today," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, an' she busted a jar o' beans 'n didn't clean 'em up fer a long time," Martha added excitedly.

"Well, I like it. Shore purties 'em up."

Mattie didn't say anything, only ran her fingers lightly over the strawberry on the edge of her plate.

George came home every evening. He worked in the small garden alongside Mattie and he began to hunt again. Although they continued only to scrape by, they were eating better and, for the first time, she felt harmony in their home—
something she hadn't felt since she left her mother's. And every day, she tended her strawberry patch.

But before the strawberries were ripe enough to pick, she heard the staccato sound of a mine whistle from the direction of the number two mine, blasting out tragedy for some family or families. Shortly, she saw a knot of men moving toward their house, some of them bearing a stretcher. Her heart was in her throat as they drew nearer, still moving toward her house. As they passed in front of her neighbor's house, she could see that the blanket wasn't covering the stretcher completely; George's bare face grimaced tightly with each jostle of the stretcher.

There had been a slate fall in the room where George and Pinkish Bayne were working. George was lucky; his hip was broken--Pinkish was dead, his head and shoulders flattened beneath a huge slate boulder.

But George would be unable to work for weeks and the Company said that Pinkish and George hadn't done their jobs right. The Company said carelessness or laziness caused the accident, so it didn't owe a thing to the Bayne family or to George. As one week spiraled into another, their pantry emptied and a desperate feeling of suffocation again enveloped her. Then, Lanny Perkins came in from Indiana to load up his family and belongings.
Two months earlier, Lanny had gone to Muncie because he had heard that the expanding agriculture companies were hiring. Now, he told George about working outside, all day in the sunshine and air sitting atop a huge machine as it swept back and forth across almost limitless fields. And if it happened to rain, a man stayed in a dry barn, working on the machines to keep them in good shape.

Later, George told her, "With machinery an' land like Lanny's talkin' 'bout, jist think a' how much food kin be growed. Why, there won't be no more hungry people in the world. That'd shore be a good kind o' work, wouldn' it?"

Mattie didn't answer. But she wondered how hungry people would be fed when all that the people growing the food saw was their bank accounts.

A week later, with George still hobbling and groaning as they loaded Lanny's truck, they slipped out of Harlan County in the middle of the night, avoiding a confrontation with Tuggle security guards over their "debt" to the Company. Two months later, George was dead.

George's friends gathered him up in a bushel basket. Lanny Perkins saw the whole thing, said it was the damnedest thing he'd ever seen.

Lanny's picker had quit on him, so he was working on it as George rolled by on his mulcher. George stopped several
yards past Lanny; Lanny said he could hear George's machine
choke down and he knew something had jammed in it. He
watched George climb down, then look into the mulcher.
George looked, then edged his head in closer to look again.
Lanny could see George's right hand and arm rising and he
yelled at George to shut down the machine first; but George
could hear nothing except the incessant belching of the
engine, the grinding of gears, the deep moan of blades
determined to whirl on. George reached down into the intake
chute. Suddenly, he pitched toward the machine, up to his
shoulder.

Lanny recalled no cry from George; he remembered a face
like smooth white quartz, a perfect circle of purple lips,
and eyes wide and glassy like those of a deer frozen in
lantern light. Lanny raced to help George, but pulled up
short when George lurched deeper into the chute, his head
snapping to the left and back, leaving the chin pressed
crazily over the back of the left shoulder. The machine,
with the back of George's head and his right ribcage jammed
against the lips of its intake chute, groaned loudly for a
moment. The body jerked and vibrated; the feet, dangling a
few inches above the ground, stepped to a macabre dance.
Then, in a split-second, the body disappeared and the
machine sprayed a great, pink cloud—a misty, bright pink
fog that shimmered in the sunlight before slowly dissipating
in the easy breeze. Lanny said it was the damnedest thing he ever saw--nothing but this cloud of pink mist and minute bits that settled slowly over the cornfield or drifted away with the wind.

So, George's friends gathered up pieces of bone and small chunks of flesh--the largest, a part of the left foot with the big toe and next two toes still attached. At the funeral, Mattie knew that the coffin contained but little of George; she knew that the box lowered into the earth and over which the preacher spoke was all but empty, for the machine that her husband had loved and had faith in had ground him up and spewed bloody fertilizer over the land.

The corporate farmer, the Company, told her it was very sorry; if there was anything it could do for her or the children, just let it know. And, after all their words, she was handed a slip of paper detailing what they owed the Company for rent and on their account at the Company's store. Damn 'em! God damn 'em, she thought.

Light, black smoke swirls and disappears, swirls and disappears before her window. The engine and the caboose alternately appear and disappear as the train snakes its way through the Smokies. Below her, a deep gorge cradles a stream rushing to the Tennessee. Above, a huge yellow ball
blazes against the arch of the sky; she recognizes Nvda, who is radiating her warmth over the mountains.

They step onto the platform at Bryson City just as Nvda is bidding them goodbye for that day, splashing her farewell across the mountains' shoulders in bright red ropes and whirls of rose and dusky purple. A crow lands on the peak of the station roof; Koga speaks to her, welcoming them home.

They take a taxi into their mountains, but she has the driver let them out at the foot of the hollow. It is already dark as they stand before McCloud's Store, but she wants to walk. She wants her children to walk that mile with her.

As they walk up the hollow, Unole whispers through leaves that rustle, rustle, through limbs that sway and creak all around them. From the forested slopes embracing them come hundreds of voices and now she understands. She watches one limb in the top of an oak high on a distant ridge; starkly silhouetted, it moves in fascinating rhythm through innumerable stars. Martha tires quickly, so she swings her little girl onto her hip. She tells her children about their relatives living all around them, about Selu and Ahwi Usdi. The new moon rises over them all; Nvda speaks, drifting on his timeless journey. She walks with Jimmy and Martha and the spirits of the old ones up their hollow, in their mountains.

Reaching their cabin, she hollers, "Osiyo...Osiyo."
In a moment, the door opens. Her mother strains to make out the figures moving toward the cabin. The youngest daughter, the only child still living at home, peeks over her mother's shoulder, asking, "Who is it?"

"I don't know. I can't hardly make...." Suddenly, her mother screams, "Mattie! Mattie!" and rushes to them. Throwing her arms around both her daughter and granddaughter, she sobs softly, "Mattie, Mattie." Tears stream down the faces of mother, daughter, sister, even granddaughter. She hugs her grandson, wetting his face with kisses and tears. Taking her granddaughter in her arms, she grasps her daughter's hand, leading them to the door.

As they step onto the porch, the daughter looks up--Grandma stands in the open door. She pulls her hand from her mother's to rush to the old woman; with her arms around Grandma's neck, she trembles with great sobs, "Elisi, Elisi," as the old woman gently pats her on the back.

There are fewer people in the cabin, but nothing else seems to have changed. Her mother looks much the same, perhaps a few more lines on her face. Except for moving with a cane now, other than being slightly more bent, Grandma has not changed. As her sister plays with Jimmy, she sits in a cane-bottomed chair with Martha on her lap. Her mother is making bean bread and her grandmother stirs a pot of hominy.
bubbling over the fire. Warm words fill the air as everyone tries to catch up on family news and welcomes are repeated.

"Oh, Mattie, it's so good to have ya'll home," her mother says.

She looks squarely at her mother, saying, "Etsi." Then again, a little louder, "Etsi."

Her mother stops talking and mixing the bean bread to look at her. Grandma also looks up from her pot of hominy.

"Etsi, tla, Mattie tla dawado. Guque Usdi dawado."

Years melt from Grandma; her shoulders draw up and the tip of her cane rises inches from the floor. Her face brightens as her mouth broadens, the corners curling up. Her eyes sparkle. For silent moments, she looks directly into her granddaughter's eyes, then says, "Vv, Guque Usdi."

Guque Usdi smiles.
CELEBRATION

Within my vision:
Sugar Maple,
   among countless victims,
   survivor of a cold-hearted season.
So recently shackled by ice like clear steel,
my brother now dances in the Earth's warm breath,
Limbs soaring, diving, twirling.
Delicate yellow-green flowers
   like sheaves of grass streaming in the wind,
calyx bells whispering hope.

Within my vision:
Grass Dancer,
   among countless victims,
   survivor of a cold-hearted arrogance.
Shackled by prejudice's transparent steel,
still my brother dances to the drum's beat of the Earth,
Limbs soaring, diving, twirling.
Spring-green and yellow yarn
   like sheaves of grass streaming in the wind,
deer-toe bells clattering tenacity.

Suddenly, my vision:
   Me Among them Of them Us

Celebrating Survival.