

***The Gospel According to No One* and Rewriting the South: Eudora Welty and the Self-conscious Southern Novel**

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Abstract

Both my novel and the critical work explore Southern places, how they are defined and how Southern people imbue them with meaning—sometimes multiple and paradoxical meanings—and, in turn, how those places define them. In my novel, *The Gospel According to No One*, narratives tied to place are pitted against each other: New South versus Old South, fundamentalism versus liberalism, nihilism versus the mythic worldview, and the Agrarian Proprietary Ideal versus what some scholars see as the homogenizing forces of Late Capitalism. The struggles between these discourses threaten to undo order within the city. Those who survive forge new identities from the fragments of postmodernism, inventing new narratives about both themselves and the places they inhabit.

My work on Eudora Welty also examines multiple Southern discourses. I argue that Welty's self-conscious focus on reproductions of the South in *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter* challenges the idea of a monolithic South, which also challenges any definitive categorization of Welty and her relationship to the imagined (the only 'real') South.

In the bridging section of the work, I explain why I chose Welty as a subject of study, explore connections between postmodernism and Southern literature, suggest a definition of the South that is reflective of Place, and examine my creative work in light of the theoretical issues I have encountered.

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The Gospel According to No One

The Gospel According to No One

Like Paul heading to Damascus, the light blinded me and down I went. Voices wailed as I bled onto pavement, and my legs was pinned under the bicycle bar. My head singed and stinking. Smoke came right off my skull. Yes, it was a light that brought me into darkness, y'all. And the voice I heard, well, it said everything about nothing and nothing about something. While you was rebuilding your city, doctors was rebuilding my face, grafting skin from my calves so I'd look like a someone again.

Chapter 1

Timothy is levitating, all of him, his black suit, his black Hushpuppies, and his broad shoulders, all suspended in front of the church. Silas points at his feet and shakes his head, nudging Donny, whose mouth is agape. Silas pulls down his cowboy hat and wipes his forehead with a handkerchief.

They're the deacons of Horseshoe Bend Baptist. Timothy's just back from the Middle East, or Southeast Asia. It's all the same to them.

When Timothy first met them out front, Silas had exhausted him with questions about what it was like in battle, whether he'd seen any action. Timothy had heard his story several times. Silas was in Vietnam and had lost two fingers in friendly fire. Silas told Timothy that since he had all his limbs, he figured he'd been mostly holed up in the bunkers. Donny agreed and said it was good to have a pastor with all his limbs and fingers. Timothy had sat on the front porch of the church listening to them rattling on and looking over their heads at a chain of clouds, nodding between their questions, as if every answer after war is yes.

When Silas started in on whether Timothy would be their pastor again, and Donny told him that the interim was ready to go, Timothy nodded and rose two feet off the ground.

He hovers there now, just over the brick steps of the church porch. Autumn leaves cover the grounds. A nuthatch shrills, and the clouds move above them in a long train of billowing white.

"We gotta tell everyone," Silas says. "This here's the proof. This here will shut 'em up."

"Not right now," Timothy says as his Hushpuppies fall against the brick steps. "There'll be time for that."

Silas cries and kneels down, pulling Donny to his knees as well. "Lord, we thank you for signs and wonders. We thought the dispensation of miracles was over."

By the time they're done, Timothy's on the other side of the parking lot getting into a black Ford Ranger.

#

They believe in another afterlife, Timothy thinks, gripping the wheel. *I'm in the afterlife now.*

The road rises, bends, twists, the kudzu rich, lush, ubiquitous. This road is nothing like the long, straight stretches of desert roads he'd known in Iraq. It's hot, but nothing like the heat of the desert. This is a verdant, fertile piece of earth, this north Palaver, but

he doesn't regret telling Donny he'd live in the city now. The pastorium is a nice, three-bedroom ranch, but it's empty, too quiet. He's moved into a complex downtown instead, a one bedroom, second-floor apartment. The place throbs. Dozens of cars wake him in the morning, engines turning, horns chirping, car doors slamming. He needs the sounds.

The complex is a cluster of sixteen brick cuboids, each with white fiberglass pediments and four columns beneath. Plenty of green space and poplar trees. He lives on one end, top right apartment. His balcony looks south, sees the Jameson Inn, the Walgreens, and a plume of smoke from the wire factory. He stands there in mornings offering something like prayers, though words stick in his throat, have since the desert.

Once inside his apartment, he falls onto the floor. He doesn't have a sofa to sit on, only a metal chair that he's gotten from the church fellowship hall. Across the room sit his books, some scattered, some piled dangerously high, the ones from his three years at university, ones Ferrell had recommended, the ones he'd gotten during his correspondence courses. He needs a bookcase. And dinner. And to hear the whisper, the steady rhythm of knowing, certainty. Flying is a lot, of course. He knows that. But there must be more.

She knows he's back, but he cannot bring himself to call her. He's dialled the number every day since his return but hangs up before she answers. Two years is a long time. And he'd not even sent an email. He knows she still works at the Walgreens down the street. Standing outside the drug store last week he watched her closing the register.

They'd once reached out to each other, and his call for help was met in her. She'd taken him wholly. But he knows that she's not waited, can't have waited for him.

It was her face, the memory of their courtship that had enlivened him as he reached for himself so many nights in the desert. But, it's too close, too much of a possibility now. He prefers emptiness. It's not so much despair, he thinks, but something essential, necessary, and as natural as breathing.

Before he loses himself in sleep, or to his recent tendency to drift, he's out of the apartment, down the steps, and onto the sidewalk. The four-lane highway moans beside him. He thinks a sidewalk here misplaced, dangerous even, but the screams from automobiles are the best distractions. Noise is what he needs. After walking southward just a tenth of a mile (he's measured the trek twice in his pickup), he's in the Walgreens parking lot. Posters advertising flu shots, two-for-one 12 oz. cokes, and Halloween candy decorate the large windows.

Susannah stands at the register. He's a few feet from the large automatic doors, off to the side. Her profile is exactly as he's always known it. She nods to the customers,

fetches cigarettes from the racks behind her, scans their items, stuffs their merchandise into bags. Her brown hair is bunched into a ponytail. She's singular minded, he knows. A glance to the side to spot him is unlikely. She'd probably stopped looking a year ago.

The doors open and an elderly woman inches out of the store and drops a sack at her feet. She's tried carrying too many. Timothy walks to her, grabs the bag, and lifts it, wrapping the plastic around her wrist.

"You shouldn't lose it now, Ma'am."

"Thank you," she says and inches away.

He turns from the woman and Susannah is staring at him from inside.

No one is in line. She doesn't speak. He wants to say something first, but words escape him. The traffic hums behind. His absence is on her face, more than his return. He shouldn't have come.

He knows she doesn't know what to do, either.

The automatic doors slide shut and open again. She laughs at him, and it's all he needs.

He walks through the doors, and she's moved from behind the counter and has grasped him tight, covering the distance in one gesture. She smells the same as always, part lavender, part vanilla. One hand on her lower back and the other on the back of her head, he pulls her as close as possible, receiving her gifts, both the strength and fragility of her love.

And then there's Ferrell, rising from the dead in his mind, carrying on about the Kalahari, the golden catfish, the most isolated creature in the world, found only in Dragon's Breathcave—Ferrell was full of facts—and he's manning the turret of the Humvee, circling around, and laughing hysterically.

#

In a trailer on the south end of the county two boys, Damon and Shirley, take turns hunching over a glass coffee table. Both wear tee shirts, jeans, and hiking boots. Shirley is stout. Damon's a beanpole. With razors they rake cocaine, then hit, throw back, grunt, fall against the sofa, and stare at the wobbling ceiling fan above.

Sherman's at the opposite end of the living room in a recliner. He pulls the lever beside him, his bare feet popping up between him and the boys. They're between his toes. He turns to the window and watches his girlfriend Tracey on the porch, where she's squatting over potted plants. She stands, lifting her hand to water the ferns. She's always burrowing in the dirt, flicking the buds, tilting her sunflower pitcher, and whispering something about reaching the sky.

It's something to do, Sherman thinks.

She dusts off her hands, takes the broom leaning against the trailer, and sweeps the porch.

"You don't actually have to do the drugs in here," Sherman says, turning back to the boys. "Take 'em home."

"I could fuck the whole cheerleading squad," Shirley says and grabs his head.

"They won't have you," Damon says. "You gotta have cock for that. Nobody named Shirley has cock."

"Come on. Professor's gettin' cranks," Shirley says.

"You boys muddied up my carpet."

Damon pops his knuckles and stands, motioning to Shirley. Shirley rubs his nose on his shirtsleeve.

"Look at those boots. You idiots been fucking in the mud again?"

"We took the truck out muddin' out in Garytown. Got stuck," Damon says.

Sherman shakes his head. "Goddamn you kids."

"You ever miss it, Professor?" Damon says.

"Trying to get through to pissants like you?"

"Do you?"

"Get out of here."

Damon sets down a wad of cash on the coffee table while Shirley opens the front door.

"Next week," Damon says.

Neither Shirley nor Damon had ever been in any of his classes. They'd staggered in to his trailer a month ago, loaded up on speed, and took home a quarter ounce of weed, enough to keep them from going to their remedial English classes. Sherman's sure they've already dropped out altogether. Damon once said he spoke enough English to work at the Honda plant anyway. *Oh, they'll be fine*. A few more weeks and they'll be piss poor, stumbling in asking for freebies, muddying up his shag carpet, and it won't even be worth it.

The storm door slams and small-talk seeps through the window. Something about Tracey's beautiful flowers. Sherman watches as Damon and Shirley hike to the pickup laughing and drive off, spitting gravel from the truck tires.

Tracey throws open the door and marches to the table. "How much we got, Babe?"

"Enough to treat you to some fine dining."

“Get your shirt on, then. We’re going to Ryan’s.”

“If Ryan’s is what you want.”

“How do college kids have so much money?”

“Student loans.”

“Jesus.”

“Didn’t you have student loans?”

But she isn’t listening. She flips through the money, two-hundred in twenties, and stuffs it into her shorts.

Tracey wants to keep her shorts on while they fuck so she shifts the crotch of her gym shorts to the side. Sherman stares at the picture of the train depot hanging above her. The headboard’s bumping the wall, and the picture’s barely hanging on. When he’s done, he falls on her and pants. Rubbing her hands over his head and through the remaining tufts of hair above his ears, she whispers something about moving. Sherman doesn’t hear, the rattling of the pistons loud in his mind.

They drive out to the four-lane. Chevy and Ford dealers on opposites sides of the street. A Waffle House sits next to the Ford place and opposite the Ford place is Ryan’s. Mostly concrete, metal, and industrial haze. Down a little ways sit a Dollar General, a megachurch, and a strip mall. Sherman jokes you can get your nails done, buy a hangun and a pack of gum, and find Jesus all in a square mile.

Sherman hates Ryan’s, the overstuffed rednecks raiding the buffet aisles like it’s the last supper, the steam rising from cheap, processed food, and the server who double takes him when he asks for two pieces of prime rib.

He sits across from Tracey now at a window looking out at the parking lot of the Ford place, watching the fatasses stuff themselves, then out the window at the fat beasts they’ll mount to get home.

Tracey tousles her hair, forks a piece of chicken, and lowers her head, her fringe swinging on her forehead. He hates her fringe, hates everything about her hair since she’s dyed it black. When they’d met at the university, it was golden.

“Let’s move to Cleveland. Pittsburgh. Or Santa Monica,” she says.

“Santa Monica?”

“They won’t find us there.”

“Just a little more time. I’ll get out of this.”

“Hope so,” she says, stuffing another yeast roll into her mouth.

#

It's dusk as they drive home. Once past Wal-Mart, the roadside disappears in the darkness. They turn off the main road, bumping over the railroad tracks before they turn into a tree line and onto the gravel drive. The oaks are thick for a thousand feet then vanish, the land opening into a clearing and the trailer coming into view. An old Ford pickup sits out front, headlights pressed against the front of the trailer, illuminating the burgundy trim, the cinder blocks holding it up, and Tracey's plants on the porch.

"For fuck's sake," Tracey says. "Wasn't he here just last week?"

"He's right on time. I'll pull round back. Go to your room, load the shotgun."

"My shift's about to start."

"Right, Jesus."

He parks the car and cuts the engine and Tracey's already bounding up the steps and swinging open the door. He hoists himself from the Prius, and no movement or sight escapes notice. Not his hand on the unsanded wood railing rising with the steps, or the moths hovering around the back porch light, or the clinking of his keys as he moves them to his pants pocket.

He locks the door behind him and fingers the blinds. No one around back. In the kitchen he pulls down a glass from the cabinet and flips the faucet until his glass is half-full.

He imagines Tracey in the back room getting to work. He's okay that she's an escort, he thinks, stripping and fucking online. It's just phosphorescent roleplay, little more than Tracey typing perverse come-ons and changing sex poses with a click of the mouse. Pixel cock, pixel pussy. *It doesn't matter*. He fucked her for real today. Still remembers her bony hand pushing her shorts over to open herself. She's making money, keeping them afloat. The drugs aren't enough. It doesn't bother him.

But the footsteps are different. The visitor clomps up the steps and onto the front porch. From under the sink Sherman pulls out the .44, clicks off the safety, and tucks it in the back of his pants.

He knows Waller will see his shadow from outside walking across the living room. Sherman's back is against the door now. He fingers the piece stuffed in his jeans and wipes his palms on his shirt. After he prays to a God he doesn't believe in, he jerks the door handle.

Waller wears a wife beater and overalls, and the front porch light reflects off his head. On his shoulder, a Gadsden flag tattoo.

"I came that you might have nothing and have it more abundantly," Waller says and laughs.

A joke that means too much.

“Yeah, let’s skip the small talk.”

Waller pushes through with an arm like an elephant trunk. Sherman loses balance, braces himself against the door.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Sherman says. “Arsenic?”

“You got the names and numbers?”

“It’s not exactly an easy drug to sell.”

“You’re supposed to give it away.”

He turns to face him, and Sherman knows Waller sees the fear, and he’s told himself not to let him, ever. But it’s all over him.

Waller lifts one side of his mouth, a half smile, and Sherman sees a bit of the thick wad of tobacco stuffed into his lower lip.

“Where there is no Vision, the people perish, Sherman.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Jack, you know how Jack is. Jack needs messengers, and you need forgiveness. Jack needs riders. Are you a rider?”

He clutches Sherman’s throat. Sherman reaches around for the gun, but Waller’s already pulled it from his pants. Waller squeezes Sherman’s neck like it’s a tube of toothpaste and he’s after the last glob. With his other hand, he holds up the gun. “You gonna shoot me, Sherman?”

In the backroom, Tracey moans. Feigned ecstasy.

Waller turns from Sherman toward the hall. “Who’s here?”

“Just Tracey.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

“Swear to God. She’s having virtual sex.”

“Maybe I could take a turn, too, huh?”

“Fuck y—”

Waller loosens his grip and backhands Sherman. Sherman’s hands go up, and Waller knees him in the nuts. Sherman doubles over, falls against the sofa and onto the floor. From the underside of the coffee table, he sees the razor, the straw, the Ziploc bag. *Pissants.*

“A fucked up world, professor. Whores selling themselves online, professors sleeping with whores. You ain’t a paragon of knowledge,” he says and kicks Sherman in the ribs.

The pistons sound in Sherman's head, the long steel arm races across Georgia, Norfolk Southern, and he's on it, perched on a grainer, with his books. No man an island, unless he's on a traincar with no particular destination. Another kick reminds him he's nowhere such, but on the floor of his trailer.

A few bumps from the back of the house and Tracey opens the door and stomps through. "I was gonna make a lot of money just now, but I reckon I'm a have to shoot someone."

She's pointing the gun at Waller.

"It's shorter than you think, Sherman," Waller says, looking down.

"Your cock?"

Waller jabs the gun against his temple.

Tracey fires, and the Tiffany-style fixture under the ceiling fan shatters. The living room goes dark.

"Guns ain't how I like to do it no ways," Waller says, just a shadow now. His boots stomp to the door.

Light from the porch bursts into the room as Waller swings open the door. "Y'all have a long night."

Tracey's on her knees seeing to Sherman as the door shuts behind.

#

Rayne leans forward, flips the drain, and rises from the tub. Bracing herself against the wall, she steps over the lip of the tub onto the floor, the other leg following. She's tripped before and must be careful. The steamed-over mirror reflects her movements, blurred and distorted. Droplets fall to the vinyl floor.

She towels off, one leg perched on the toilet, then the other. She pulls back her hair into a short ponytail and rubs the steam off the mirror. Her mother's always wanted her to grow it long.

She walks through the house naked, but it doesn't matter. There's no one there.

The blinds are drawn, but the houses lining Cedar Street won't begin to stir until mid-afternoon anyway. Friday mornings are quiet, the university kids huddled in duplexes down both sides of the street hung-over from Thursday night shenanigans.

She checks her voicemail, puts the cell on speaker, and heads to the fridge.

"Message 1: Hey, Rayne. Cliff. Heard about your dad. Really sucks. Listen, I..."

She grabs a carton of orange juice and an apple.

"Jesus Christ, I hate talking like this. So, well... Listen, call me back okay? For real this time."

She takes Cliff's old vodka from a floor cabinet and sits down at the table, the wooden seat cold on her ass. Across from the vodka and juice sit her pistol and badge. She unscrews the vodka and shakes the carton of orange juice. Having seen enough noir and read enough paperbacks she knows this is exactly what a detective does when she's fucked things up. She pours the juice in first, then the alcohol.

"Message 2," the automated voice on her cell says. "Rayne, It's your mama. Hope you're doing well. Daddy says hi and that he's been feeling good today, thank the Lord. And Timothy was here last night. He said for me to tell you hi. We're looking forward to seeing you tomorrow night. Call me when you get a chance. God bless you, Darling."

She downs the screwdriver. And another. She doesn't know how her mother can be so happy. *Must be Jesus.*

At the stereo, she turns on "Windfall" by Sun Volt and falls onto the sofa with the apple. She's called in. The chief understands.

Pictures haunt the room. Rayne holding her dad's hand out in the field. Standing beside him out at the Little Nee Nee. Her feeding cows while Raymond crouches beside her. A banquet they attended to raise money for struggling farmers, an outing at Lake Banner, the two of them in a canoe, him holding a paddle above his head. She remembers him rocking back and forth, teasing her. He's not gone yet. But maybe she is.

Cable's crap, as usual. Daytime soaps, infomercials, Maury Povich. She turns off the television and stares at her reflection on the screen.

No, staying inside is the worst, she thinks.

She dresses, jeans and flannel, and, though tempted, puts the vodka away.

Outside, the Bradford Pear is golden beside the porch. She leans against the rail and reaches out for it, touches a leaf, running her finger along its golden surface, tracing and retracing. Her father hated downtown but said this tree was its only redeeming quality. When the house went up for sale five years ago, she had to buy it.

She checks the mail, nothing, and pushes herself on, though she doesn't want to walk, every an inch an effort. She's down the steps, trudging toward the square.

Cedar Street is an oasis amidst the concrete and asphalt of downtown. There's a tree in every front yard, hedges around every house. And all of the houses are at least a hundred years old, some older. Antebellums, Victorians, and one oddly placed Georgian, but they've been kept up, ageing offset by locals bent on maintaining turn-of-the-century charm.

She walks the length of the road until it meets College Street, where she takes a left and then a quick right onto an access road, passing the fountain and swing—a small park—and winding her way behind the square.

The alcohol has warmed her, numbed her. She walks with ease now, glides, even. A giant Louis Armstrong stares at her from the back of the Italian restaurant. The lunch-hour traffic has clogged up the streets. Twenty or more cars sit on Rome waiting to turn left onto Bankhead. She ambles up the hill along the sidewalk and emerges in the center of four L shaped blocks, 1950s store facades, the standard small-town America square. It looks nothing like the rest of Palaver.

On a wrought-iron bench outside the Corner Bistro she takes out a cigarette and lights it. A group of kids, definitely under eighteen, huddle beside the coffee shop, taking turns with their own cigarette. Any other day she might care. Right now she's swimming, light, the past week as insignificant, as transient and uncomplicated, as the congestion pulsing through the intersection.

A college-aged woman stands next to an elm, her purse dangling from the strap over her shoulder. She's hip: big sunglasses, skinny jeans, and a Pac Man tee shirt. Waves of long brown hair fall on her shoulders. Her head is cocked to the side.

Rayne doesn't see herself in any of the kids nowadays. Sixteen years since she finished her bachelor's. This generation is foreign to her. Hers was big hair, The Cure, aerosol cans of hairspray, Members Only jackets, and bedazzled vests. Carter—whom she was too young to care about or remember—Reagan, whom she despised, and Bush Sr.

The kids come up for air, cast glances at her, and huddle again. The branches of the elm sway and the woman hasn't moved. Rayne waits for her to shift, to lean against the tree, to check her cell phone like everyone else these days. Nothing. Rayne throws down her cigarette and lights another.

Perhaps she's waiting for someone. Doing an experiment for the cuckoo Psych department at Palaver U. "How do people adjust to eccentric behavior in public?" she imagines a professor asking as he hands out their social assignments for the week.

Burt Sanchez, grossly overweight and always sweaty, swings open the door to the Corner Bistro. A longtime friend who shared the Reagan administration with her in high school. Sunlight reflects off the glass door, blinding her. She throws a hand to shield her eyes. Burt takes a look at the woman and shakes his head, then over to Rayne.

"Rayne?" he says.

She waves and takes another drag.

He hobbles over to the bench and sits. "I think she's dead." He nods to the girl.

Rayne taps her cig against the iron armrest. "I know how she feels."

He plops down beside her, the hair at his temples soaked through. "That girl's been here since I opened the place."

"She likes the view, Burt."

"Worries me." He wipes his forehead. "Jesus, it's hot for October."

She's off today. This is her day, her day to wallow and not give a shit.

"Did you try talking to her?"

"She didn't say anything."

"Narcolepsy."

"Worst case I ever seen," he says and hoists himself up. "You coming in? We got a lentil soup to die for."

"I think I will."

He hobbles back inside as she stubs the last cigarette—for now—onto the brick walkway.

She stands and takes her phone from her pocket and snaps a photo of the girl.

"Some weather, huh? Are you enjoying the sights? Do you watch *The Walking Dead*? Give me the sexy look. I like the Marilyn Monroe glasses. There you go. Hey, look at that! You missed it. Let's play the quiet game. Okay, you win."

Rayne pulls down the woman's shades. Behind is one long stare, right through the bookshop adjacent to the bistro.

Rummaging through her purse she finds an ID (Skylar Smith), a dime bag, a small, empty yellow envelop ("V" written in red ink), and a Palaver U. student card.

Schizophrenic catatonia, Rayne thinks. She has a great uncle on her mother's side in South Georgia who freezes with his arms akimbo, stays like that for hours. One year at Thanksgiving his arms went out while they said the blessing, and he didn't snap out til her mother served the pecan pie.

As Rayne calls for an ambulance, the woman's eyes open and the sunglasses, which Rayne has perched on her forehead, fall to the sidewalk.

The girl grabs her head with both hands. "Fuck," she says, looking around, her hair shifting side to side.

A swallow lights at her feet and hops across the sidewalk.

Rayne calls off the ambulance. "Nice nap?" She grabs her sunglasses off the concrete and hands them to her.

Short, choppy breaths are all the woman can manage. She's been doing her own swimming, Rayne thinks.

“Oh my God,” the woman says.

“Detective Hammondtree. And I’m about to eat some lentil soup.”

“What’s going on?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Rayne says and holds up the dime bag and empty envelope. “As far as anyone knows, you’ve been standing right there,” Rayne says and points to the tree, “all night long.”

“I don’t remember. I wasn’t thinking.”

Rayne leans in. “You’re lucky.”

“There’s nothing.” She squints and lifts her hand, bites her fingernails. “Skylar Smith.” She exhales, as if relieved she remembers. “I’m a student at Palaver University. And...I’m trying to remember. Can you give me just a few minutes?” She paces in front of Rayne, circles the tree. “I’m a Biology major.”

“We’re getting somewhere, I guess.”

“Right now all I want is another one of those pills.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Some dude. I don’t remember.” She lowers herself to the bench again and bites her nails. “I feel so sad,” she says, pulling her hand out of her mouth.

“What’d you take?” Rayne says, standing in front of her. “What was in that little envelope?”

Skylar’s face is in her hands now. She’s sobbing, the quiet kind of sobbing. “Can you get me another?”

“Honey, I’m a cop.”

Skylar’s in an all-out cry now, shoulders shaking and everything.

“Settle down, for fuck’s sake.”

She’s not even supposed to be working today, Rayne thinks. Leave the girl be, go home, get the vodka. Sit by the pear tree.

“I don’t care,”

“What happened last night?”

An elderly couple pass by, double take.

“She’s okay. Just a rough day,” Rayne says, waving them on.

“Does it matter?”

Rayne turns back. “It might.”

She points at Rayne. “All that matters is that I have another, okay?”

Skylar's other hand pulls the pointing arm down. She crosses her arms. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's going on." Her head falls, chin on her chest, sobs rising less frequently now. She sniffles and wipes her nose with the back of her hand.

Rayne sits beside her on the bench and puts an arm around her.

Skylar grabs at the bottom of the Pac Man tee. "I'd been out with some friends listening to music. They were invited back to this guy's apartment..." She lifts her head, wipes her nose, and pushes her hair to the sides of her face. "I hit a bong, got high and this other guy handed me the envelope. I think that's what happened anyway."

"Where was this apartment?"

"The Lofts," she says, thumbing behind her. First building on the left. No, I think I'm making it up. Are you sure you don't have another pill I can take?"

"If you ask me that again, I'm taking you in," Rayne says. "Do you remember the number?"

"I was drunk, too."

"You trying to kill yourself?"

"It's been a really hard semester. That's why I was out in the first place. And I'm begging you, listen. It's illegal, I know and everything, but if I don't get another—"

Someone lays on a horn, and a car swerves, barely missing a Honda Civic stopped at the traffic light.

Chapter 2

Sherman falls into the recliner. Whenever he's hungover, his thighs hurt. He's rubbing them now while Tracey fills up her water pitcher at the kitchen sink. He dreads telling her he got drunk for nothing. The water off, the patter of her feet against the linoleum irks him. Every sound irks him. There's only one he'd welcome and he knows it's coming. She's back in the living room, setting the pitcher down on the coffee table and eyeing his hands between his thighs.

"Well?"

"It's beyond me, Tracey."

"Don't be poetic. Are we out? You give that stupid drug away?"

"I gave someone the drug."

"Who was it?"

"No idea."

"What the fuck happened?"

He pulls the lever, puts her between his toes. What happened was simple. He'd gone to a party downtown, spotted a girl hiding in the corner, and offered her some coke. She declined, said drugs were the reasons she'd had a bad semester. He told her about Vision, said it'd change her life (just as Waller had said) and that all he needed was her address, a really strange way to deal drugs, he'd thought ever since Waller had given the ultimatum. Then he kissed her and hoped to God she was eighteen. He blames the four beers he had beforehand. She kissed back, for a few seconds anyway. Then someone pulled him off, told him it was too late for a geezer to be out. Sherman left, wondering who the fuck still uses the word geezer. He'd also slipped the envelop in the girl's purse. So she had the drug, *good going*, but he didn't have her address.

"I was sloppy," he says. "That's it."

"Do you know where they live?"

"Nope. Nothing."

"Fuck, Sherman. You want to be dead?"

"Sometimes."

"What about us? Don't you care about us?"

She grabs the pitcher and marches out the front door, slamming it shut behind. Sherman turns to watch as she takes the water pitcher and leans over her plants. The pitcher's trembling in her hand.

The hum of the train starts, even and quiet in the distance. Here's the sound he wants. Sherman loves the approach, like the whole continent swelling beneath him, a

mountain rising. Now it howls. He and Tracey are small in the moment. Tracey stands and, as she always does when the whistle sounds and she's out at midday, she shields her eyes against the sun and looks in the direction of the train as if she might see it as it pounds the tracks through the woods. The deeper into winter they go, the more the leaves will shed and reveal the body. But not now.

Sherman turns away from Tracey, closes his eyes, and welcomes the rhythm. The walls vibrate around him and, for a moment, he's back in the classroom. The subject is Palaver: Past, Present, and Future, and the kids search him with their questions. He gives it all he has—his life's one offering. There's nothing left, he thinks, as the sound of the train trails off.

He pulls the lever and sits upright. From his pocket he pulls the bag full of envelopes. He scatters them onto his lap and takes one, stuffs in his finger, and retrieves a tiny black pill. He lifts it to his face and smells it. Nothing. He licks it. Nothing. Just for kicks, he lifts it to an ear.

"Speak," he whispers, closing his eyes again. He puts it over an eye. "Oh, let me see this vision of which you speak, Great Waller."

The drug tempts him. He's an easy target. He already knows where *he* lives. When Waller returns, he can tell him: "I did it. I gave the drug away. To myself. This is where I live. Now get the fuck out."

"Who you talking to?" Tracey says, the front door slamming behind her.

He hasn't opened his eyes. "I'm not sure."

"You're losing it."

"That happened years ago."

"You can't stay there. You gotta keep moving."

"I'm a historian. It's where I live."

"I'm a part of it," she says, her voice falling from him as she retreats.

"You were just there."

"Christ, are you fucking serious?"

"We didn't have to do it on those essays. That had nothing to do with love."

He squints tighter, hoping for a quick exit from the scene. She's still there. He opens his eyes and falls back in the recliner. He gathers the envelopes and drops them—one by one--back into the bag.

Tracey sits down on the sofa.

"The ferns look nice. You're doing a good job out there," Sherman says again, his voice even now, an olive branch.

“They’re all I got.”

“You had Ryan’s last night.”

“That’s rich. You know what I mean.”

He wants to reassure her, to say something true, but he drops the bag on the floor and exhales a train.

“What do they want with the names and addresses anyway?” Tracey says.

“No idea. To send out promotional fliers?”

“I could do it,” she says, standing now. “If it’ll get us out from under these creeps.”

“What do you mean?”

“I get the kids names and addresses. I’m closer to their age. Or, you know, we can just get the fuck out of here like I keep saying.”

#

“Sit down here,” Rayne says, pointing Skylar to the sofa.

Skylar grabs her elbows, sits, rocks, and sobs.

Too young to be so pathetic, Rayne thinks, and heads to the kitchen. She pours a glass of water at the sink and downs half of it in a gulp and fills it again, trying to offset the alcohol. “I gave up lentil soup for you,” she hollers back into the living room.

Skylar’s sobs rise to meet her.

“That’s special? You think?” Skylar replies, barely audible from the other side of the duplex.

The alcohol has made her thighs and lower abdomen hurt. She walks into the living room, sets down the glass on the coffee table in front of Skylar, and sits across the room.

“Want to watch TV?” Rayne says.

If she weren’t drunk, she’d haul Skylar to the station.

Skylar grabs the water from the table and lifts it, spilling it onto her chin and shirt as she swallows, a dark yellow streak falls down Pac Man’s face. Once the glass is back on the table, she stares it down.

“Your parents around?” Rayne says.

“Don’t call them,” Skylar whispers, her eyes still on the glass.

“What would I say?” Rayne says.

“Are you going to take me to jail?” Skylar says.

“Was it X?” Rayne says.

“It was in that envelope. I told you.”

“What did this guy look like?” Rayne says.

“I don’t remember. Who’s this?” Skylar says, pointing to the picture frame in front of her, the canoe photograph.

“It’s not important,” Rayne says.

“He break your heart?”

“I broke his.”

The doorbell rings.

Rayne rises, balances herself on the arm of the chair, the room spinning.

“Are they coming for me?” Skylar says, sobbing again.

“Jesus Christ. Who’s coming for you?”

“I don’t know,” she says, rubbing her hands all over Pac-Man’s face. “Will you ask if they have another pill? Please.”

After deliberating over each step, grabbing the arm of the sofa where Skylar sits—she’s drunker now than she was for some reason—she finds Darrell at the door. He’s 6’3 and fills the frame. His face is carved in sharp angles. He’d be scary if he wasn’t so sweet, Rayne always says to him, which she hopes isn’t racist. He’s in uniform, clutching a handful of daisies and lilies at his chest.

“Here you go,” he says.

“What are these for?”

“Was gonna give them to the woman across the street, but she didn’t open the door.”

Skylar mumbles behind her.

“I’d invite you in, but I have company...unfortunately,” Rayne says, taking the flowers.

“I hope he’s not a musician,” he says. “Got tired of that sad country Cliff was always playing.”

She steps into the hallway and closes the door behind, one hand gripping the doorknob, the other holding the flowers. “Strange shit’s going on, Darrell. I’m working. Sort of.”

“This is your day off.”

“What’s that?”

“You want help?” he says. “They got me parked up at The Triangle with a radar.”

Glass shatters inside the house.

Rayne turns, swings open the door.

Skylar's bashing one of family photos against the coffee table. It's the one of Rayne and Raymond in the canoe, her favorite.

Rayne hurdles the sofa, misses Skylar, and tumbles onto the floor, the flowers now loose around her.

Then the movements run together.

Skylar's going at her wrists with broken glass.

Darrell hollers something about Rayne's day off and sweet Jesus and bends over for Skylar, who's screaming.

Darrell wrestles the shard loose from Skylar's hand and tries to pull her up from the sofa, but Skylar pulls away, dropping to her knees on the floor and reaching for another piece of glass.

Rayne and Skylar are both on the floor now, the coffee table flipped over.

Darrell cuffs Skylar, who's sobbing again.

Gripping her under the arms, Darrell hoists Rayne up and onto the sofa then leans over and one-hands the coffee table upright. "She was trying to kill herself."

"Take her to the hospital," Rayne says. "She took some drug last night. She's gone crazy. Or maybe she was crazy to begin with."

"Seems you both acting crazy," Darrell says.

Skylar convulses on the floor, elbows going out, stopped short by the cuffs. Narrow streams of blood line her wrists.

"Maybe so," Rayne says.

Darrell squats down, grabs Skylar's arms, and eases her up.

He looks at Rayne, who's fallen in on herself, fingering the picture frame on her lap.

She leans forward, picks up the glass pieces from the floor, and tries to fit them back into the frame.

"Come on now," Darrell says, grabbing Rayne's wrist with one hand, his other now on the chain between Skylar's cuffs.

Rayne opens the fists she's made and the glass clinks against the table.

"There you go," Darrell says.

His hand cups the back of her head, steady, strong.

"You know how I got my name, Darrell?"

"Your daddy said that there would always be somebody in the world praying for rain."

Skylar tries to loosen herself while Rayne traces Raymond's face in the picture.

“This woman here, she really needs some prayer,” he says and looks at Skylar behind him.

Rayne looks up at him. “Skylar’s her name.”

“So we’ll pray for Skylar all the way to the hospital.” He laughs and staggers with her out the door.

“Thank you,” Rayne whispers as the door shuts.

Her parents would say it’s the start of the seven-year tribulation. The apocalypse: seven-headed dragons, Jesus on horseback, brandishing a flaming sword from his mouth, and thousands of youngsters, one minute doped up, mouths agape at the sky, and the next jabbing glass into their wrists.

She gathers the flowers and places them in a vase on the kitchen table, steps out of her jeans, and pours orange juice and vodka into a flask.

#

The almost-darkness smothers Timothy. Before, he’d had the streetlight falling into her second-floor apartment, but she’s drawn the curtains. And this thing, he thinks, wants to devour him. But it’s not her. She stops at the edge of the bed, a shadow, and sits. He smells it, like earth, like he’s opened it up again. The moisture. Her body, his body, both. It’s a smell that, until now, he’s only remembered for two years. It makes him nauseous with pleasure and fear. His naked body beneath the covers has given over. He thanks her in his mind for seeing to him with her movements, her grace. How can this be rocky soil? he thinks. It’s anything but. He tries not to mix metaphors, but he knows Christ can signify multitudes. She burrows under the cover, and her cold hand grasps his, and his blood warms.

“I waited,” Susannah says.

He lets go, making a fist under the covers and letting her hand form to it from the outside. “I wasn’t expecting it.”

“But I did.”

“There must’ve been others.”

“Sometimes, there were. But most times not.” She leans over and kisses his forehead as if to relieve him.

“I wouldn’t have cared.”

“You lie.”

“Are you going to sleep?”

“My mind is racing, Timothy. I just want to talk. I want to talk about you, about those marks on your body, about where you’ve been, what you’ve done.”

“Let’s talk about you first,” he says. “I owe you that. You speak first. I stole your opportunity.”

“Nothing has changed. I’ve stood still. You saw me today where you left me.”

“And your family?”

“Dad’s been farming the Hammondtree place, renting it out.”

“Why didn’t you start school?”

“Don’t have any use for it. Life’s just been time passing,” she says, chasing his hand again under the covers. “I have dreams. The same one now, started a few months after you left.”

He pushes himself up, his back against the headboard. She stops reaching for him. Placing his hand against the small of her back, he whispers, “Tell me.”

As she speaks, Ferrell speaks, and he must silence him, and un-remember.

“I walk through an empty house. I holler. There are staircases raised up everywhere, and the rooms all go into bigger rooms. Keep getting bigger. Cobwebs are thick, like sheets on the walls. The windows are all broken and there are boards over them. ‘How much,’ I always ask—I’m there with an agent--and I’m always surprised because it costs next to nothing, and I think, ‘I can fix this up. I can live here.’ I can get new glass for the windows. I can put new floors in, you know? I imagine the two of us living in it. Sometimes I’m pregnant in my dream. Then I invite mom and dad to look, too. They’re impressed—they’re always easy, living in that dump all these years—and they look up and all over. They love the chandeliers. I lead them upstairs and show them where they’ll live. It’s a mansion, Timothy. And it feels so good. It’s worse than any nightmare.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I’m no Joseph.”

“Maybe it’s you.”

“The house?”

He nods in the darkness. “What about church?”

“Haven’t been in a while. The new preacher’s boring. You’ll be back?”

“I spoke to Silas and Donny. They’re letting the interim know I’m back.”

“God, Timothy. Are you ready?”

“I reckon it’s better to jump right in again.”

“But you were so torn. You know, about—”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me why. Why doesn’t it matter now?”

“Just passing time.”

She’s quiet. He rises from the bed and pulls up his jeans.

“How can you believe that?”

“It’s what you said, not me.”

“I was saying it because you left and there was nothing for me. Now there is.”

“You think it can go back like it was?” he says, pulling on his shirt in the darkness. “Can you turn on the light?” He’s taking short breaths and following Ferrell as they shuffle through the desert, hide their eyes, and fall behind stacks of sandbags.

The light appears above a floor lamp, shining onto the ceiling. She leans over and slides up her panties. Timothy’s turned to face the corner as he tucks in his pants.

“Are you ashamed?”

“Not ashamed.”

“Why don’t you look at me? In full light.”

When he turns, her body bare before him, he tries to summon what he once felt. Her breasts are full, her nipples dark, and her body’s curves like the ones in his memory, but something’s wrong, he feels, but cannot articulate it. She pulls the ponytail from the band and her brown hair falls in waves on her shoulders. She tousles it now in front of a mirror against the door.

“I can’t believe you got tattoos,” she says. “And you talk different.”

“How do I talk different?”

“I can’t say for sure. What did you see over there, Timothy?” she says.

“What do you think I saw?”

Her apartment is as bare as his. “A temporary place,” he remembers her saying before he left. You don’t hang paintings in a temporary place. He ventures out of the bedroom, down the hall, and into the living room. They’d planned to move in together, just before he enlisted.

“Are you hungry?” she calls.

There’s a leather sofa, two end tables, and a flat-screen perched on the opposite wall. All-white walls.

“Where are your pictures?”

“What pictures?”

She appears in the hall, one hand hanging at the side of her head as she fiddles with an earring.

“I thought you had pictures of us.”

“Just that one on the end table. Us at the river. Are you hungry?”

Timothy picks up the picture and cocks his head. “Why don’t I remember that?”

“I don’t know,” she says and switches to the other ear. “Maybe you’re not back yet. Maybe this is a dream. I’m going to make some dinner,” she says and rounds the corner into the kitchen.

The pots and pans clang from the kitchen.

“I think I’m going home,” he calls out over the clamour.

She doesn’t hear.

“I said I think I’m going home.”

“What?”

“I’m going home.”

“Why?”

A pan in one hand and a strainer in the other, she stands in the doorway, looking over the distance between them. He’s lost, but he cannot tell her, cannot speak it in a language that she will understand. He’s accepted what she’s offered, and he wishes he could give back in equal measure—a dinner, a movie, a normal night.

“I don’t know,” he says, balling his hand into a fist.

“I don’t know why you came to see me,” she says. “After all this time, after all I’ve waited—”

“Don’t put that on me,” he says. “I didn’t tell you to wait.”

He thinks now of the brown leather braid in her hair, her hands slowly moving it into place just moments ago, rearranging it as she gazed into the mirror. Was it to affirm? Was it to waylay the endless ache? To reassure herself that she has control?

Maybe her fingers had slid the small, palpable braid into the thick of her hair to counteract her smallness with the gift of action.

“Your hair looks nice,” he says and falls onto the sofa.

“Can I cook now?”

He sleeps through the noise in the kitchen, dreamless sleep, and awakens to Susannah kneeling beside him, his hand in hers again, and her face, beckoning.

Chapter 3

Sherman parks the Prius at the train depot. Tracey's thighs are too much, and he's told her so.

"Don't get your jobs confused," Sherman says.

She takes the Ziploc bag from him and stuffs it in her purse. "Don't you know anything about advertising?"

"Let's start easy."

The depot's falling in on itself: windows shattered by rock-throwing misfits, the main door long ago boarded. Though the train runs through, it hasn't serviced passengers in sixty years, and hasn't picked up freight from the building in at least thirty, stopping only to switch cars from time to time. A fence encloses a half-acre of knee-high grass. Sherman hops out of the Prius, squeaks open the gate, heads into the yard. The sky's gray, like one giant cloud hanging above. It'll rain soon and soak them both. He's looking at the sky now as Tracey follows.

"We don't have time for a tour of the depot, Sherman. I should go on up."

Her shorts are too fucking short, too tight.

"I don't want you to do this," he says.

"It's impossible for you."

He knows she's right.

"You know when this place was built?"

"Yes, 19 something. I don't fucking care. This ain't class."

"It doesn't matter anyway," he says, walking to one of the loading docks. He hoists himself up and perches there, his legs dangling. "Waller says to tell them not to--"

"Take it before they get home. I know."

"How many you got?"

"Just one."

"That's enough."

"You look real pretty." He takes a dime bag from his pocket. "You need some? Might help."

"I'm not nervous."

"I am."

"I'm not saying any of that religious shit."

Sherman lights up. "I wouldn't expect you to."

She walks to him and wedges herself between his legs. He moves her fringe to the side. It gives and falls back into place, and he moves it again until she laughs and grabs

his hand and tells him it's not going anywhere. Her hair's tied up and back, only the fringe loose. The perfume she's chosen, Calvin Klein something, a half bottle she'd gotten off ebay, fills his nose.

"Go on. I'll watch the trains," he says.

She grabs both of his hands and brings his fists up against her chest. "Promise something."

"I'll try."

"After this, we'll get out of here."

"I'll do the best I can."

She sighs, pecks his cheek, and turns. He watches her ass until she's out the gate and around the corner.

If he climbs the building, he can jump in a grainer as the next train passes.

He puffs on the joint and kicks his feet against the wall beneath the short platform, heels bouncing.

Other places, a whole map of them, wait.

The sound of things breaking, that's what he likes, the sound of upheaval, the sound of movement, of change. He's become a new person only once—some never do at all—and he loved how it felt, every dark moment of the change, though he'd not anticipated the depressing quotidian in its wake.

After a crack of thunder, a cloud opens, and rain patters on the grass before him, the platform where he sits, and on his khakis and polo shirt.

He imagines Tracey's pink nipples showing through her wet shirt. She's inviting more than he wants.

"You're wet," a voice calls out from across the tracks.

It's Rayne Hammondtree, former captain of Palaver High's softball team, his sophomore-year chemistry lab partner, and, at one time, more. He drops the joint—as if she doesn't notice—stuffs the dime bag back into his pocket. She's walking toward the fence on the other side of the tracks. She's in shorts and a tee shirt.

He lifts a hand. "You, too."

She's put her fingers through the chain links. "How are you?"

"Not much better. You?"

She knows his place, knows because she was a part of the investigation. His shenanigans, the university felt, were criminal—lewd. Does she hold it against him? He wonders.

"You wouldn't believe."

“I might. I believe a lot more than I used to.”

“Trying to get the blood flowing.” She’s started running in place, ready to leave.

“We’re getting old, aren’t we?”

“I guess so. I remember that spot,” she says and points. Then she’s around the corner and has disappeared down Rome Street, taking the same path Tracey took just moments ago.

This spot, he thinks, and laughs. Hopping down and kneeling over, he finds the joint soaked.

They were in this spot a long time ago, back when he was an idealist.

The day he lost the last shred of idealism was the day he hoisted his pants from the floor, fastened his belt, and left Tracey on his desk spread-eagle so he could teach his 3:30 class. He knew they’d seen him, at least one or two students, from the hallway. But he had time enough before it got around.

The Western Civilization lecture hall was packed with a bunch of freshmen taking the class because they had to.

He wasted no time. His hand up, moving in broad strokes across the chalkboard. He erased a word he’d written—SETTLED—and replaced it with DIASPORA.

He remembers saying something about the railroad slicing the world in two, then telling Charles Ford to put his fucking cell phone down, when the face of the security guard darkened the door’s mesh screen window.

#

Rome Street ascends to the square. Rayne’s past the trophy shop, the Westfield Bakery, and she’s pushing harder up the incline, calf muscles and ankles pinched and sore. She hasn’t run like this in years. She wasn’t expecting to run when she started out earlier. Had even forgotten her sports bra. She’s sure Sherman noticed.

The running will help, she thinks. Lack of exercise. Slow metabolism. These are the reasons for unhappiness. She pushes harder, unable to tell now whether it’s sweat or rain that drenches her.

She pushes harder because of him, as if she can do enough running to put him well behind, to leave him at the depot. No, leaving him is easy. But not the impulse he represents, the one always pulsing through her blood. Getting lost. Sucking in air, she crests the hill, hunches over, and grabs her knees.

#

After showering, she drives to her parents’. The rain has let up. Windows down, radio up, she’s in Son Volt’s “Drown,” drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, her

hair blowing back. She glances at herself in the rearview. Her whole fucking life is this song, she thinks.

Since yesterday the pieces of glass have been on the floor, the picture frame facing up on the coffee table.

The roads ribbon over kudzu-clad hills for miles once she's outside of town, up on the northeast end of the county. There are no mountains, only mounds hinting at the Appalachians a couple hours north.

Her parents live in a white four-bedroom, two-storey clapboard house. The six-hundred acres of land, most of it farm land, has kept five generations of Hammonds rooted to the place, bearing the weight and reward of the soil. Her father's been retired for more than a decade, and now he's dying. With no one to take his place, her mother will continue to rent it out or sell it.

She could've stayed on and helped after high school, but she pushed on, and away: Palaver College for a criminal justice degree, police academy, and a series of failed relationships.

More than once she's entertained the notion she'd been adopted.

To thank him for checking in on her the day before, she's asked her partner Darrell to dinner with them. His Ford Explorer sits out front. She pulls down the drive, between two stately oaks, and beside him, the gravel from the drive crunching beneath tires. He's smoking, one hand hanging out the window. He nods, takes a drag, and opens the door.

Rayne lifts herself from the Impala, slams the door, and they meet between the cars, out front the stone walkway. The privet hedges around the porch are trimmed, the close-cropped lawn covered by a layer of red and orange leaves, still damp from the rain.

"How you feeling?" he says.

"No idea."

"I love home-cooking. Mary Jo's is the best."

"Better than your mom's?"

"My mom never cooked. Afraid Daddy wouldn't like it."

Mary Jo must've heard, Rayne thinks, because she's swung open the door and is waving to them. "Hey, Darling," she calls and inches to the end of the porch. "Good to see you again, Darrell." She's in a brown cotton dress, straps over her shoulders, her white hair a mess of curls. Rayne thinks her mother has gained weight since the last time she saw her.

Rayne's glad she jogged before coming.

"I'm looking forward to it. Rayne told me y'all were having cornbread," Darrell says, waving to her.

"Got plenty of it, too."

Mary Jo turns, inches back to the door, and disappears inside, the storm door knocking twice against the jamb.

"What happened to the girl?" Rayne says.

"Had a psychologist in today," Darrell says. "Said it was hard to know anything without knowing what she took."

Out of her purse she pulls the small envelope. "V. We should see what we can dig up."

#

The onions make Rayne cry. She wipes her eyes on the sleeve of her flannel shirt.

Slicing by the window, she watches the rainfall. The wind picks up and bends the vine-like branches of the backyard willow.

"Good thing harvest is over. Those farmers would've had a hard time in this mess," Mary Jo says.

"You going to keep renting out the land?" Rayne says, still slicing.

"I reckon. Don't know what else to do," Mary Jo says.

"I sure miss the farm," Darrell says, looking up from the laptop on the table.

Mary Jo, cutting carrots, speaks between chops, the knife giving the counter a good thud every time she slices through. "Oh, your family were farmers?"

"Well, my uncle was. I drove a tractor for him a couple of summers when I needed to get away from home, peanuts and corn."

"What about that. Whereabouts?"

"Down 'round Lagrange."

Rayne gathers the sliced onions and potatoes and drops them onto a plate. Mary Jo grabs the plate of carrots from behind and puts them on, then moves to the sink to wash her hands. The storm door slams out front.

"Guess Raymond's gone out on the porch again," Mary Jo says, rubbing her hands on a towel. "He just hates being inside. One day I caught him out in the field behind the house chewing the fat with the farmers. He walked all that way." She turns to look out the window. "But I tell you what, when I was out there, he was like a shadow, it was a pretty sight, walker and all. The sun was going down, and Gary Muse was standing by his cotton picker just nodding his head while Raymond probably went on and on about the

history of the farm. The whole world was red all around. I thought it was the most beautiful thing.”

“That’s a nice story, Mama,” Rayne says, sighing and sitting down at the table.

“Then Katy bar the door. If I didn’t fear the good Lord, I might’ve just cussed when I went out there and told him to get back in the house. I helped him back, of course. He told me they were trying to harvest too much too fast, that they needed to be more careful, take their time. He got it into his head that because they’re renting our property, and the soil ain’t family soil to them, that they don’t care about it as much. That might be true but you can’t blame them. They were just trying to make a living.”

She pats Rayne’s shoulder as she walks by. “And he sure loves the rain. That’s where you got your name.”

Rayne stands, goes to the oven, and pulls out the roast.

“Hasn’t rained like this in a while,” Darrell says.

Rayne places the roast on the stove, the steam rising when she curls back the foil to scrape in the carrots and potatoes.

“That smells good. I haven’t had a home-cooked meal since I don’t know when,” Darrell says.

“You should get Rayne to make you some pot roast on occasion.”

“I need a woman in my kitchen since Jasmine left,” Darrell says and laughs.

“Fat chance. What are you finding?” Rayne says.

He fingers the laptop tracking pad and clicks. “Vidrio, Vikings, Vike, Valium (of course), and Venus. Heroin, tranquilizers, Quaaludes.”

“I feel sorry for these young ‘uns today. Back in my day—”

“They had drugs then, too, Mama. You just never saw ‘em,” Rayne says. Then to Darrell, “Wouldn’t do it,” putting the roast back in the oven. “Wasn’t even high, not like that anyway. This wasn’t euphoria.”

Darrell’s phone rings. He picks it up, inspects it, and thumbs it off. “Then why the heck do it?” He sips sweet tea from a mason jar Mary Jo’s set beside him. “Palaver’s gone crazy.”

Mary Jo looks back and forth between them for a moment and settles on Darrell. “Darrell, you can come out on Saturdays anytime and have dinner. We always have home cooking on Saturday evenings,” Mary Jo says.

“That’s nice of you. Appreciate it,” he says.

Rayne sets down green beans and cornbread in front of Darrell's laptop. The chair beside him squeaks against the floor, and Mary Jo sits down, puts her hands together, and purses her lips.

"Now, Darrell, you're a church going man," she says.

"Mom," Rayne says.

"Just got one question, Honey." She turns back to Darrell. "The other night I was in bed and these two figures appeared out of nowhere. Well, I say nowhere, but I reckon it was heaven. They were about waist-high, but one of 'em was a bit shorter. They told me they were the Holy Spirit and the Holy Ghost."

Darrell cocks his head. Rayne's in the corner shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

"They're the same thing," Darrell says.

"That's what I said," Mary Jo says and pushes a white curl behind her ear. "Just one thing, one part of the trinity. But, I don't think so anymore. There's four."

"What do you reckon you'd call that?" Darrell says. "The Quadrinity?"

Rayne sighs. "I'll go get Dad."

#

Raymond has parked his walker under the willow tree. His clothes are soaked. He white-knuckles the walker, leaning in, and his head is tilted up, looking into the tree.

"What are you doing, Dad?"

"Come here," he says, lifting one hand from the walker. He's hunched, sixty years of farming heavy. Rayne obeys, crouching under the branches.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he says.

"Dinner's almost ready," she says, obliging him by straightening and glancing above.

He manages a smile. "How's my daughter doing?"

"I'm hungry."

"Your mama loves this tree, too." He chews his bottom lip and shakes his head. He erupts in a fit of coughs, his jaundiced hand rising to cover his mouth.

Without looking up, "I know."

"I almost asked Mary Jo to marry me here. But she said yes fore I could get anything out. She thought it was magical, this willow." He's looking up, blinking away drops of rain as they fall onto his face. "Always superstitious."

"Let's go, Dad. This isn't good for you."

#

Mary Jo and Raymond are in bed by nine. Rayne's on the porch swing as Darrell's taillights disappear down the gravel drive, her heels kicking against the planks beneath. She opens her purse and pulls out the flask, sticky from the orange juice she'd spilled on it the day before. She swallows a couple of shot's worth, goes back in the house, and climbs the stairs to her old bedroom.

She rummages through her high school shit, old love letters, report cards, a yearbook. She finds Sherman Thomas and laughs at his picture, full head of hair, pre-ruin, and takes another drink from the flask. There's a bracelet he gave her, white gold with a band, "Always" engraved on it. It doesn't fit. *What a dork*. She's too drunk to go home. She puts everything back under the bed and rises.

She walks into the spare room across the hall, filled with boxes and an armchair long abandoned, covered in a white sheet. She turns on the light. It's stupid to imagine it as a second nursery, she thinks. The room is too drafty for a baby. She doesn't know what her mom was thinking.

She pulls the sheet off the chair and sits down, pulling her cell from her jeans. She texts Cliff, "How about lunch?" With her head back on the chair, she falls asleep.

Mary Jo cracks open the door on a trip to the bathroom, just past midnight. Rayne has left the light on. "Get in bed, Darling," she says. Rayne stands, grabs at her neck, then touches her mother's shoulder as she crosses the hallway. Once in her room, she staggers to the bed and collapses.

#

Timothy's heart is heavy as the Hammonds cross the threshold into the church. He takes Rayne's hand first, surprised she's come. Before he was deployed, she rarely visited.

She's been drinking, he knows. Her face is full, eyes heavy, bloodshot. She doesn't care. She's looking into him. Is she reaching out? He cannot tell whether she condescends—from what he knows of her she might well be. Her hand is soft, frail. Perhaps she's come to search. Perhaps she's lost.

Rayne lets go, and Mary Jo tells Timothy how good it is to see him at the church. Raymond wrestles on, without looking at him, preoccupied with his own body, wrangling about with the walker beneath him. They walk on, and his eyes follow until they slide into the pew halfway down the aisle. Their permanent spot. Mary Jo and Rayne first. Raymond sets the walker at the end of the pew and eases down, one hand fumbling about for Mary Jo's until she's clasped it and helped him onto the cushion. Timothy's surprised he's still upright. The tumours are everywhere, the doctors have told them.

Silas nudges Timothy out of his trance.

Lorraine Finley stands before him, smile cracked, eyebrows reaching the sky. He shakes her hand, but she doesn't settle for it, pulling him close. She'd been his Sunday School teacher and had watched him grow into the fine young man he is now, she reminds him. He's buried in the scent of mothballs and cheap hairspray. He served the church and now served his country, she rambles on. She can't begin to tell him what joy, she says. Can't begin. He bears it. Channelling through him, though, is panic. He's here but he's there, too. He's always there.

#

"Church boy?" Ferrell asked.

They were lying on their bunks, the place dark except for the orange tip of Ferrell's cigarette. Timothy was drenched in sweat and could smell himself. No matter how much he showered, he couldn't wash off the heat, the desert stink.

"Yeah."

"What kind?"

"What do you mean?"

"Bono or Billy Graham? Van Morrison or Benny Hinn?"

"I'm Baptist, if that's what you're asking."

"Not really, but okay."

"I'm so hot."

"I'm a Christian, too," Ferrell said.

"Bono or Billy Graham?"

"Neither, I don't like labels. Too much order."

#

He sits in the high-back chair on the platform. The sanctuary is at capacity, probably two hundred people crammed in for his first Sunday back.

The place has never left him.

There wasn't a night in Iraq he didn't imagine it, dream about it, sitting here in safety. The mauve carpet, the wood panel walls, the stained-glass windows. Horseshoe Bend Baptist was built in 1885, but might as well have been dropped from heaven because, with the exception of heating, air-conditioning, and indoor plumbing, the building hadn't changed since. He was sure almost everything had remained the same, the same mildewy smell from the baptistery, the smell of pine, the smell of cheap perfume. The differences between then and now are separate from the building, charted by the

rising and falling of the sun, the enormous weight of birth and death, faces filling it up, ageing and disappearing, only to fill with new faces.

Susannah's on the third pew from the front. She sits with her hands in her lap. She hasn't brought her Bible, always using the one in the shelf on the pew in front of her, the King James Version with letters as small as fleas. And she never sings. Even when Felix Winslow swings his arm, invites them, begs even, she holds the hymnal like it's an unwanted gift.

He tries to lose himself in the choir, tapping his feet. "Oh, who will come and go with me? I am bound for the promised land," they sing, but another song plays in his head. It's "Miserere," one Ferrell had played at night on a small radio between their beds.

"What are they saying?"

"Lots of things. My favorite line: 'Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.'"

"Psalm 51:7."

"Hell if I know."

"It is."

"It's beautiful. Your choir do anything like this?" Ferrell says.

"They don't sing like this," Timothy says, putting his hands behind his head and closing his eyes. It's the most beautiful song he's ever heard. "My choir doesn't read music. They're country."

"Of course."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing, just your accent."

The offering gathered, the songs sung, Silas welcomes him back, telling the congregation the good things Timothy has brought to the church, the community, and his country. He tells everyone how he knew God's calling on him when he first met him, could feel the anointing on his heart, and could see the flame in his eye.

Timothy stands and shakes the pastor's hand, opens up the Bible on the pulpit and inspects the congregation.

He has puzzled over his first message, his re-entry.

The pews creak beneath the members. Someone coughs. A crying baby is hoisted to its mother's breast and carried out the side door. He looks over them, Susannah, the Hammonds, Silas and Donny, and is shaken. It's too much. Sweat has formed on his forehead. A drop falls onto the thin pages of his Bible. He thinks Susannah was right. It's too soon.

“Most of y’all have been to the beach,” he says. “Y’all have seen endless stretches of sand, if not in person then on the television or in pictures. Some of you have put your feet in it, sun bathed atop it, thrown towels across it, shook it out of your shoes, dusted it off your hands, your flip flops. Some of y’all have to clean it out of your car’s floorboards or your hotel room’s sofas. When you come back to Palaver it’s still in your clothes. Maybe there’s still sand in your closet. Or your car. For some of you that was years ago. Some of you go every summer. Y’all enjoy it. Sand is pleasure. It’s pesky and it’s gritty and dirty and beautiful and exotic.

“I’ve spent the last two years on, around, and in sand. I’ve been running on it, desert sand, just as exciting and beautiful but dangerous, too. I’ve slipped and trudded, had it in my boots, on my uniform. I’ve ducked under enemy fire, tried to bury myself in it, wished sometimes the whole place would swallow me whole. We marines got dirty like you wouldn’t believe. I’ve had it all over my body. I’ve shielded my eyes during sand storms. I’ve had it in my mouth, too, my ears. It’s been in my underwear, too.”

A few congregants giggle.

“The Psalmist says ‘How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them. If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.’”

What does he mean? How can he even talk about the thoughts of God? It’s an analogy for God’s standing outside of place and time. The sand was often a metaphor in the Bible to signify abundance, infinity even. These people lived on sand. It wasn’t found only at their vacation spots. It was an everyday matter. And it was endless.”

The people are restless. What does sand have to do with anything? It’s a stupid metaphor, he thinks, a stupid topic for a sermon. If his church were more sophisticated they’d have a lectionary with chosen themes for each Sunday. They wouldn’t depend on their pastor to bring them whatever God has laid on his heart.

“What are the thoughts of God? Can we number them? If we can, if we can point to anything in an infinite sequence and say this is number one thousand of it, then none of the others has a number, see, because then it wouldn’t be infinite. God’s thoughts, the Psalmist tells us here, are just like that. We can’t identify any if we can’t identify one. What I’m saying is that we cannot number the possibilities of God. We cannot say what God can or cannot be.” Silas amens him from the second pew. He’s nodding his head.

Timothy’s drenched. His black suit is thick wool.

He talks around, always coming back to sand. Sometimes their approval rises to meet him. Sometimes he knows they’re bemused. His mind feels too much, can only

communicate tangential ideas. What he means to say is quite simple, he knows. But how to get to it?

“Who are we to say what is and is not the work of God?”

Exhausted with his attempts to assemble language, he knows what he must do.

He places his arms out and walks to the edge of the platform. His muscles tense, every one.

His feet rise from the platform. Gasps rise from the congregation. Someone says “Bless him Lord.”

He prays it’s not for show, not for anything other than hope, but the prayer catches in his throat. It’s too soon, and his doubt catches him unaware. He falls, landing on his soles, but he’s empty, and dizziness sets in. He reaches for the side of the pulpit but misses and falls, his body crashing against the platform. Silence arrests the place.

He pushes himself up onto all fours. “This is just one grain of sand,” he calls out, one hand now above his head. “Just one grain of sand.”

Susannah’s is the first face he sees. One hand covers her mouth, and she’s shaking her head. Her eyes accuse him.

Rayne’s is the next. She’s laughing.

He clenches his hand into a fist and loses himself in “Miserere” as he falls again. Donny and Silas scoot out of their pews and meet him. He climbs their bodies, his arms around each of them. They lead him to the side door. As they open it, a child cries, and the organ strikes the first chord of the invitation.

The Gospel According to No One

The Exodus came, and we left the milk and honey, where Father ploughed and milked til his hands were calloused, and his back was sore from doing good work, and we slunk into the womb of the whore of your city. He was a tall man, so tall he'd duck to pass under your doorways. He was too tall for your doorways but y'all promised him he wouldn't have to work hard, he wouldn't have to break his back doing the good work anymore but could wear a suit and supervise your bastards, and could make a lot more money than he could in Canaan.

But man cannot live by mammon alone, see? You misled him into the valley of the shadow of death, your vile suit, putting on your names, putting on airs, to be whatever y'all think it is to be something. I was eleven when he sat me down, back when I might've been a somebody, and told me we was leaving, that we'd have a better life. The farm was hurting his body, he said. He sat in his armchair in the corner of the den. Even crouched over, he hovered over me like your Jesus hanging on the cross, the sun shining in behind him and falling over me. He was getting too old to get his hands into the good earth, he said. I told him I didn't want to go and kicked over the old dry sink. I can still hear it tumbling over. It was my fault for not being older, I thought. And maybe I was right. But there's no sense in trying to imagine the somethings that coulda been when all you got are the nothings that are. My Mama cried because we had to leave. We'd still own it, he said. We just wouldn't live there no more, that someone else would be renting it from us. He needed to be close to the city. He resigned from the Holiness church the next Sunday and everybody wailed like Martha at Lazarus' tomb.

As clear as day I remember him lifting up a rattlesnake above his head one last time. He shook it, people wailed, it jerked its head back and forth but didn't bite. Him holding that snake, yelling at the snake, or what he thought was God, or maybe even me, is the last clear memory I have of him. I don't remember him the day he wore the suit and forsook the land and sold his soul for your bowl of beans.

Chapter 4

Sherman and Tracey are naked and tangled under a plaid sheet, toes out at the bottom. Tracey drapes a leg across Sherman's, wrapping them further. The window's open. The curtains shift as a breeze glides over. It's cooler now than the past few days.

"Was easy," Tracey says.

"How easy?"

She hadn't wanted to talk about the party the night before, told him only that she was ready to go home. Sherman didn't push, stoned and bored out of his mind at the depot and too thankful for all she'd done. But now, rested and absolved of guilt by her dreams, she opens.

"Nothing you wouldn't have done."

"Tell me."

"Well, I gave it to a guy who lives there."

"No shit."

"He didn't take it while I was there. I sent Waller an email when we got home last night. Everything you said."

He rolls on top of her and buries his head between her neck and shoulder. "You're a miracle."

"How much more?"

"I don't know."

"I didn't like it, Sherman." She pushes him off and gets out of bed. "You want breakfast?"

She moves to the desk in the corner and sits, busying herself at the computer.

Pulling the comforter from the foot of the bed over him, Sherman's muffled voice says, "It's too early."

"It's noon."

"Too early."

"You used to teach eight o'clock classes."

"I'm a different person."

She taps against the keys, swings the mouse. He knows her routine. Her emails first (Hotmail, Yahoo and Gmail, two accounts each, one for her avatar in Second life and one for herself, her real self), and then Facebook, where she checks on her crops on Farmland and the typical horseshit her friends post. Then she logs into Second Life and checks her messages there. Her shift isn't until ten p.m., but sometimes avatars get so

horny in the morning they need fucking before lunch. If that's the case, he showers, parks in the recliner, and reads.

"O.M.G., Sherman," she calls without turning to him.

"What?"

"You won't believe this."

"You hear from Waller?"

"Nothing."

"He'll probably show up with a shovel tonight. Customer?"

"Not that either."

He pulls the cover down to his chin. "Okay, what then?"

"Listen. 'Went to Horseshoe Bend Baptist this morning and the pastor levitated.'"

"Bullshit," Sherman says. "Baptists don't levitate."

"It's Kaeri's status on Facebook."

"Kaeri was baked. What's she doing in church?" he says.

"Her cousins go there."

"Baptists discriminate, humiliate, and manipulate. They don't levitate," Sherman says.

"Listen to the comments:

Sarah: WTF, Kaeri? For real?

Kaeri: I swear to God. He was preaching. He was all sweaty and looked like he was gonna pass out, then he started floating.

Rick: He been watching too much Mind Freak. LMAO

Damon: So he was high?"

"I didn't know Damon knew Kaeri," Sherman says.

"Me neither. Now shut up," she says.

"Sarah: 'What was he saying?'"

Kaeri: "I wudnt listening."

Damon: SHAME LOL

Rick: Did he heal anyone?

Kaeri: I don't even know if he meant to was weird like.

Sherman's mumbling while she talks. "They don't pontificate, meditate, assimilate, tolerate—"

"Would you shut up?" she says, laughing.

Tracey continues reading:

"Kaeri: I'm going back tonight. He's preaching again.

Rick: HALLELUJAH. Dumbasses. I don't even know why people still go to church.

Damon: For circus acts.

Sarah: You think it was for real, Kaeri?

Kaeri: I dunno. I want to see it again.

"Well, that's something you don't see every Sunday," Sherman says, now resting against the headboard, baring his chest to the room. He keeps the blanket over his crotch. His body embarrasses him in the morning.

"I want to go," she says, turning to him now.

"You're kidding."

"You don't think it'd be fun?"

"'Church' and 'fun' are not bedfellows in the English language."

"What about 'fuck' and 'you?'"

He tosses a pillow at her, and she punches it to the floor. "You want to get Wrestlemania up in here?" she says, standing and flexing her muscles.

"I'm petrified. They could call you The Fringe."

"I can't believe you don't like my hair."

She charges the bed with arms raised then pulls the blanket off him. "Morning crotch!" she hollers, tossing it onto the floor and jumping on him and swinging around. She's got him in a chokehold. His face reddens. They're both cracking up. Her head rests on his shoulder, and she's looking down at his crotch. "You're so naked right now."

"Let me get a shower." He breaks the hold and falls on top of her again. "Then we'll go to church tonight."

"For real?"

"I'm returning the favor. But it's a little uneven."

"You can take me to Ryan's afterwards, then."

"Not what I meant," he says and hops off, bee-lining for the shower.

#

He hasn't worn a blazer since he was fired. It's tweed with professorial patches at the elbows. It feels scratchy against his arms as he turns into the grass lot of the old church.

Outside the car Tracey hooks her arm around his. He's sure she's unpacking memories of their classroom courtship—though God knows why she'd want to. A crowd has formed around a brick-framed marquee announcing, "The King is Coming!"

“We get to see the flying preacher and Elvis. This is shaping up to be a fantastic day,” Sherman says.

“We should’ve smoked beforehand.”

“Tracey,” someone calls.

It’s Kaeri. She’s holding her cell phone, her thumb scrambling across its surface. As they approach she drops it in her purse and hugs Tracey.

“Oh my God. Your dress,” Kaeri says.

“Thanks.”

Sherman agrees. The sleeveless, burnt orange dress, though a bit revealing, looks good on her.

“They’re saying the service might be cancelled,” Kaeri says.

“Why?”

“They’re not sure they can fit everyone inside.”

“You remember Sherman?” Tracey says, sticking out a thumb beside her.

“Hi,” Kaeri says, not even looking at him.

He doesn’t blame her.

“I’m going to look at the headstones around back,” he says and breaks free from the crowd. He walks alongside the giant bushes and the white wall of the church until he’s beyond, in the cemetery.

A couple hundred dead souls. They have names like Cook, Mathison, Shuggart, Hutchins, Webb, Driver, Thomas, and Mayfield. Some dead as long ago as 1820 and some as recent as 2006. Out here they still bury folk. The grounds are well-kept. Small American flags dot the cemetery. The tufts of hair above his ears blow in the breeze as he scrambles around, reading tombstones, one hand up to shield his eyes from the sun at westward turns.

A black dot on the far side of the cemetery catches his eye. He winces. It’s not moving. Perhaps a monument of some sort.

Walking a labyrinthine trail between the headstones, he makes it to the dot, which is not a dot at all. It’s a young man, bent over, head in the palm of his hand, his legs resting over the name ROBERTS KENT (1903-1956-An Angel Always). He’s wearing a white button-up, sleeves up to his elbows, tattoos along both arms.

“Greek?” Sherman says.

The man looks down at his arms and pulls the sleeve.

“What’s it say?”

“Long story.”

He realizes it's an old student.

"Timothy Furey. My God, how are you? I didn't notice. Was too busy looking at your arms." He leans over to shake his hand. "You come to see the flying preacher?"

Timothy takes it, "Sort of."

"You're a preacher, too."

"I thought so," he says, letting go and putting both hands in his pockets.

Sherman lights a cigarette and sits on the headstone opposite. He nods at the now hidden tattoos. "You like the Gnostics?"

"It's Christian."

"You'll be run out of here if they see that. They don't like tattoos."

"Right."

Timothy stands. "It's been good seeing you, Professor Thomas."

"Oh, I'm not a professor anymore."

"Guess we have something in common, then," he says and turns, disappearing around the side of the church.

Sherman thinks of his old life as he inhales the cigarette and knocks ash onto the grave. It was three, maybe four years ago, close to the end of the fall semester. The lecture hall had emptied, and Timothy stood before him, told him he wanted to talk, said Sherman had gotten him thinking.

He followed Sherman up the stairs to his office. Sherman unlocked the door and plopped into the office chair. Timothy sat on the other side in an orange plastic one. "What's on your mind?" he said. The previous semester they'd covered the Reformation, and Timothy talked to Sherman endlessly about *sola scriptura*, and grace alone, saying he felt the reformation was more political than spiritual, said that the mystics had long gone where Protestants were just now going through Martin Luther.

"Are you Catholic?" Sherman said.

"No, I'm happy with my tradition. But you have to be skeptical, always, of anything systemic, not personal. Are you familiar with the apostle Paul's conversion experience?"

"Yes, big ball of light blinded him, changed his name and all. So tell me about your form of Christianity."

"What, exactly, do you mean by form? There isn't a form. Form suggests that you can distill it somehow. I can't do that."

Timothy stood up and lifted his hands into the air. "The heart cries out from Sheol, Lord, hear his prayer," he said as his arms swung into the air. "Hear the prayer of

one crying in the wilderness. Hear the prayer of one standing on the mountain. Hear the prayer of one lying in the valley.” He turned up the volume. “Hear the prayer of one trembling alone in hallways. Hear the prayer of one baking bread, and at the table with three empty chairs. Hear the—“

“Timothy,” Sherman shouted.

“You’re ill, Professor.”

“I think your man heard your prayer.”

Sherman’s face was red, sweating.

“I’m sorry, Timothy. I didn’t mean to yell.”

What a freak. Sherman throws his cigarette down on the grave and stubs it out under his loafer.

#

Sherman’s only half-surprised to see Timothy, now suited in black, arms reaching beyond both sides of the pulpit. Rather than flying he exegetes a passage, The Beatitudes.

He does it justice, Sherman thinks, and even nods to Timothy as he closes the sermon. The crowd is lined up along the walls and sitting in metal folding chairs they’ve brought out from the back. They sing “I Surrender All” and after the closing prayer, Timothy’s gone, has taken the back door. Sherman makes an Elvis joke, but Tracey, crestfallen, doesn’t laugh. Outside folks shake their heads, load into their cars, and form a long line out of the grass lot.

“I’m sorry I made you sit through that,” Tracey says, as they fall into the car.

“I enjoyed it.”

He can’t wait to get home and pull off her dress.

#

Rayne’s in the corner booth of the Waffle House wishing they still let people smoke. She’s got her head down and a finger looped around the tiny handle of the coffee mug, moving it in slight circles on the table. Darrell had called an hour ago. They’d found another kid. He was on an access street staring at the back of Burrito Smith’s. He’s in the psych ward now, along with Skylar, who’s started pissing her pants and screaming all hours. On top of that, it’s been a year since she’s seen Cliff, whom she’d told in no uncertain terms she never wanted to see again.

Cliff lowers himself into the opposite side of the booth. He grabs the menu from beside the window and looks down. Rayne looks up. He runs a hand through his long hair and jiggles a zipper on his leather jacket. He hasn’t showered in three days, she estimates, his hair a greasy mess.

“You really need to look at the menu?” Rayne says.

He puts it back. “Habit.”

He’s still fidgety, his shoulder jumping and his pinky finger tapping against the table.

“You’re gonna have a double order of hasbrowns, scattered and covered.”

“Triple,” he says.

“I thought you were starting to fill out that jacket a bit.”

“Not been an easy year for me either. But I got a new guitar.”

Rayne lifts the coffee mug to her lips and sets it down. “Feel like I should’ve bought it.”

“It was me who slammed it against the wall. You get that hole fixed?”

“I did.”

He puts a hand through his hair again. “So what are they gonna do about Raymond?”

They don’t realize the server is standing at the end of the table until she clears her throat. She must be thirteen, Rayne thinks.

“Well, hello,” Rayne says.

The girl, long red curls and freckle-marked face, has a pen perched over the order pad. They order, and she vanishes.

“Fucking Christ,” Cliff says. “You’d think they’d get servers who can talk.”

“Kids.”

“So?”

“Not anything. Dad doesn’t want treatment. It’s past that point anyway. He hasn’t been well for a while. But he wouldn’t go to the doctor.”

The server sets down a glass of coke in front of Cliff.

“Really sorry about it,” he says.

“How’s the music shop?”

His shoulder hops again.

“Doing a few lessons here and there. Not selling well. Location’s balls.”

His eyes are bloodshot. He must be at the bottle, too, Rayne thinks. She wants to ask, wants to know he’s surviving.

“Y’all should be on the square,” she says instead.

“It’s what I’ve always said. But Chuck won’t budge. Complains about overhead there.”

Cliff's hashbrowns arrive, and he goes to work, using the side of his fork to slice them into manageable shapes.

Rayne takes her plate of eggs and grits from the girl, who barely cracks a smile. "Appreciate it."

The girl turns and tends to another table.

"Listen," Cliff says, his mouth half-full, his fork still working on the pile. "It's a horrible time, I know. But I've been doing some thinking." He grabs his coke and washes the mass down.

"About?"

"You know. Listen, you got detective and all. I know that's why you ended it. But it's done. Nothing else to prove."

"It wasn't just that, Cliff," she says, now at work on the eggs.

"But it was some of it."

"This is really romantic. Is there an engagement ring in my grits?"

"Mope around in your prison camp head. You know it was good." He sets down his fork and leans back.

"Sometimes. But mostly it was manageable."

"That's true for anybody."

"But you're right. It's not a good time."

"You need me."

"It's busy, Cliff."

"It's always busy."

"Not like this."

He's back at the hashbrowns, balancing them on his fork and shovelling them in, his shoulder still twitching. "I need my Son Volt CD."

"No idea where it is."

"Everything okay?" the server asks, appearing out of nowhere.

"As good as it can be," Rayne says.

"You can talk?" Cliff says to the girl.

#

"Tell me about church," Darrell says, pulling the chair out from under the table and sitting. He lights a smoke.

Rayne does the same, sitting across from him. "God, Darrell."

"What you described sounds—"

"He was levitating."

“Ain’t seen such in church. One time our preacher jumped. Just once. He’s a big fella.”

“My parents were confused. Of course, it’s bullshit, but they love this guy. How do you tell ‘em?”

“Whoa,” Japheth says, waving his hand in front of his face as he enters the lounge. “We need a non-smoking lounge in here.”

She’s often thought the only thing Japheth knows how to patrol is the recycling bin. The other officers tired of his preaching about their responsibility to the environment. He’s an anomaly on the force, probably the only kid with a humanities degree and horn-rimmed glasses. Hipster’s the term, Rayne thinks. He’s passed the detective test with flying colors, but the chief is reticent to let him out on the field. “Too green. Only twenty five, for fuck’s sake,” he’d told Rayne, ‘green’ being quite appropriate.

“Lot of old folks loved the Bakkers, too. Gave ‘em a lot of money,” Darrell says, ignoring Japheth’s entrance.

“You talking about the preacher?” Japheth says. “I watched some Youtube videos on it yesterday. It’s a trick.” He sits down with a cup of herbal tea at the end of the table—liquorice, she smells. Rayne hates liquorice.

“Well, I seen ‘em do it on TV, floating and all,” Darrell says while he kills another phonecall on his cell. “Seen this one fella reach through a window and pull out a card on the other side. But never seen ‘em do it in church,” he says and laughs. “Bet that was something else.”

“I laughed,” she says.

“You laughed?” Darrell says.

“Out loud. I couldn’t help it. Parents didn’t say anything on the ride home. When we got inside, just before I left, Mom hugged me and just told me to remember that the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“Sometimes I think he’s got some explaining to do,” Darrell says and stubs his cigarette in the ashtray. He shakes his head.

“Hate to change the subject,” Japheth says and takes a long sip of his tea. “But I think you should let me go undercover.”

“Oh yeah?” Rayne says.

“I’m smart, and I’m young, quicker on my feet. Bet I can get my hands on it in no time.”

Rayne crosses her arms, keeping the cigarette tight between fingers. Darrell looks back and forth between them.

“You remember that time, Japheth, when you pulled that old man over in the Dodge Ram just to tell him he’d bought a gas guzzler?” Rayne says.

#

Chief Richardson was Chief long before Rayne started, but his face and hair are just as red now as they are in his police academy picture hanging in the foyer. He sits behind an oak desk, pencil in one hand and, to Rayne’s sure to Japheth’s horror, Styrofoam cup in the other as she knocks and enters. He nods to Rayne as she lowers herself into the chair in front of his desk.

“I don’t have any ideas, Chief,” Rayne says. “But I will.”

He leans back and takes a drink from his cup and sets it down on the desk, twisting it slightly.

“You just found out about your father,” he says and scratches his orange beard. “I don’t mind if you take it easy. Japheth wants to look into it, too.”

“We find the dealers. From there, we work our way up. Obvious, I guess.”

“Their parents came by, the kids in the ward,” he says and takes another sip of coffee. “I want to say something, you know? I sent Japheth to ask questions at The Lofts. Didn’t get anywhere.”

“I’ll find it, Chief. And them,” she says, her hands clenching the armrests.

#

At the top of the stairwell Timothy stands, knocking at Susannah’s door. A single incandescent bulb lights the landing. He’s a shadow. When she finally opens the door, she keeps the chain fastened. It jerks taut, a straight line over her face.

Timothy moves his hand from the doorjamb and reaches to touch her face, fingers stretching, hand cramped between the frame and door. She pulls back.

“That dream that I’ve been having, Timothy, the one about the house, we could’ve filled it up, you know.”

“We still can. Open the door, Susannah.”

“Not after what you did.”

“You don’t understand,” he says, his hand now limp on the chain.

“That’s the problem,” she says. “How can we make a life? You know it won’t stop here.”

“Explain.”

“You can’t do what you did and expect people to forget. They’re going to start coming. You know the Bible. You know what happened to Jesus. You’re going to get crowded. You’re already untouchable. What was it? It wasn’t right. It didn’t feel right.”

He pulls out his hand now, stuffs it in his pocket. "Where's your faith?"

"Faith in what?"

"Me."

The woman who lives across the way hauls two sacks of groceries up to the landing where Timothy stands. It seems five minutes pass between every thud of her feet on the staircase. Timothy looks to Susannah and down to the woman, then back to Susannah. They're both waiting. When the woman reaches the landing, she says hello to Susannah and asks if there's anything she can do.

"We're just having a talk, Ms. Fincher."

Ms. Fincher studies Timothy and, having decided he's no threat, sets down her bags, pulls her keys from her purse, and opens the door. Timothy lifts her bags to spare her bending over again.

"Thanks," she says, not meaning it.

After she slams the door shut, Timothy turns. "I don't need more enemies."

"I want a simple life, Timothy. That's all."

"Can we work through some things, face to face?"

"We are face to face."

"Without this thing between us."

"That's what I want to know. You made me wait. I think I'm allowed to make you wait, too."

However much he's compelled to shoulder open the door, to make her see how she's wrong, she's right to be indignant. Where once all his secrets were hers, he's reclaimed his half and has trespassed in that way. But there's too much that she can't understand, he knows. They're calling out to each other on either side of the door, but their calls are both welcomes and refusals.

He turns and descends the staircase as she shuts the door.

#

"Saying your prayers?" Ferrell said.

"Trying," Timothy said, his hands clasped and resting over the blanket. "You miss home?"

"You worry too much."

"It's the worst."

"I just think of them. I think about Thanksgiving. Won't be over here forever, you know?"

"Depends."

“Hey, they’ll send our bodies back, man. Don’t be macabre.”

Ferrell rustled in the bed, and a light appeared in his hand. Timothy looked over at Ferrell bending over and reaching under his bunk. He pulled a bag out from under and unzipped it.

“Check this,” Ferrell said.

Timothy propped himself on an elbow.

“We gotta be up early.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ferrell said, lifting a small box from the bag. “Alabaster. “Look at this.”

Ferrell moved to Timothy’s bed and perched on the edge. “You know alabaster? Woman in the Bible broke—”

“I know.”

“Look at this.” He held the box in one hand, the light in the other.

It was the size of a family Bible. An image of two hands on the top, palms down, thumbs touching—fingers webbing out, snake curled around the wrists.

“This is history, man.” Ferrell set down his flashlight and opened the box. Inside was a broken and curved piece of ceramic. “Christian magic.”

“Like miracles?”

“Maybe. There’s a whole other world man,” Ferrell said, shutting the box and moving back to his bunk. He put the box back in his pack and pushed it under. “When I think about how miserable it is over here, I just remember this box.”

“You haven’t told me anything about it,” Timothy said.

“They dig up this stuff all the time, man. Archaeologists. This piece came from Egypt, 8th or 9th century. It has a spell on it.”

“Occult?”

“Nah, man. It’s all about Jesus. You’re a preacher, right?”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Family store. We got a lot of history dealing this stuff. My grandfather, Nareg, was from Armenia but moved to New York in the ‘40s. He brought a bunch of shit with him and started on the streets, then set up shop in the Bronx, just a year after he started, so the story goes. So then he fell in with the mob. Instead of paying protection, he gave them shit.”

“No way.”

“For real.”

“When my granddad died, my dad, Frank, who got his name from Sinatra, took over shop. People know our name, you know?”

“Your granddad liked Sinatra?”

“Oh yeah. The mafia, come on. And when this shit’s over,” Ferrell said, “I’m going to finish a degree in history, or archaeology, and do the same.”

“Going to work with the mob?”

Ferrell laughed. “It ain’t like it used to be.”

#

Timothy pulls over the railroad tracks and onto the dirt drive. It’s too late to be here, he knows, but logic has not steered him for a while. His headlights press against the trees and the overgrowth of the shrubs on either side of the road. The dense growth of plants breaks and he’s slicing through what must be an acre of land. The trailer sits well off the road.

He parks out front and lifts Ferrell’s gift from the passenger’s seat.

A woman’s voice meets him as he gets out, stands in the floodlight. “Who’s there?”

He searches for her face. Only the right front of the trailer is lit.

“What’s in your hand?” she yells.

A gun fires. He ducks, stumbles, and falls atop his box.

“Timothy,” he cries into the ground, hoping the box is not shattered.

“Who?”

“Timothy, the preacher.”

“Timothy the preacher? That’s no name.”

“You were at church tonight.”

“Oh,” she says. “That Timothy. I should shoot you for not flying.” She laughs.

Sherman’s voice wrestles with hers for a moment then calls out. “What are you doing?”

“I need to talk,” Timothy says, rising from the ground and dusting himself off with his free hand, the box still in one piece.

The window clacks shut, and a line of lights comes on through the house. Timothy edges backwards, leans against the front of the truck until Sherman—just a shadow on the porch—opens the storm door and calls him in.

Sherman hasn’t bothered putting on a shirt, only a pair of briefs. Taking the weight of the storm door, Timothy thanks him and enters.

“Sorry about that.” She’s wearing a robe tied around the waist and has one foot on the shag carpet of the living room and the other on the linoleum in the kitchen. “Can’t be too careful,” she says.

He sets the box on the coffee table, next to the last remnants of cocaine and edges around it to sit on the sofa. He looks up, back and forth between the two.

Sherman walks to the coffee table, sweeps the remains in his hand, takes the razor, and goes to the kitchen. He dusts his hands over the garbage.

“You were the talk of the town today,” Tracey says.

“Word’s getting around.”

“I was telling Tracey Baptists don’t fly,” Sherman says from the kitchen between opening and closing drawers.

“How’d they take it?” Tracey says. “When you did, I mean.”

“I think most of them are up in the air.”

They laugh, but Timothy doesn’t. He’s looking at the hands on the box.

“What you got?” Tracey says as Sherman brings cups of coffee and puts one on the table.

“It’s Decaf,” Sherman says.

“It was a gift,” Timothy says.

“Love the design on top,” Tracey says.

Sherman leans over the table. “From Pandora?”

“That was bigger,” Timothy says.

Sherman takes his mug and heads to the recliner. “Of course.”

“Sherman, get some clothes on,” Tracey says.

“Bother you?”

Timothy shakes his head.

“See? He’s fine.”

“I’m not,” she says.

He turns and heads to the hallway. “Jesus.”

“So what’s the deal?” Tracey says, pushing herself against the arm of the sofa and putting her legs up, feet almost touching Timothy.

“What do you mean?”

“The flying. I’m not going to let it go. You’re sitting right here.”

“I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Bullshit. Ain’t nothing I haven’t seen on television. David Blaine and Criss Angel both do it. It’s a trick, isn’t it?”

“You can believe what you want.”

“And you’ll never tell?”

“I don’t want to be burdened with other people’s opinions.”

“Oh, that’s wise. You’re a preacher. Besides, what you want and what you get’s different. Always.”

“What do you want?”

She sets her coffee on the table and adjusts her robe, stuffing the sides between her legs so she’s not showing. “Santa Monica. Beaches. To get out of the fucking South,” she says. “Don’t dodge the question.”

“I didn’t come to talk about flying.”

Sherman’s back in the room in khakis, a button-up shirt, tie, and the blazer he’d worn to church. “This suit you, princess?” he says.

Tracey finger-whistles. Sherman eases into the recliner and balances his coffee on a knee.

“Well, I’ll let you two boys have it. I’m going on to bed.”

She tucks the robe between her thighs again as she gets up from the sofa. “You ain’t heard the end of it,” she says to Timothy. “You’re gonna tell me,” she says, giving him a sidelong glance as she walks through the kitchen and disappears into the hallway.

Sherman sips the coffee and pulls the lever on the recliner, his feet popping up. “Can’t do magic tricks and expect—”

“I’ve heard this.”

Sherman sips again, breathes through his teeth. “It’s 1:30. What could you possibly want at 1:30? You want to talk about the reformation again? Want to tell me I’m ill?”

“I apologize.”

“Why’d you think I was sick?”

Timothy leans back. Both feet rest on the floor, his hands palm-up on his knees. “You were sad. Could see it. Could feel it.”

“Ain’t everyone?”

“No, not like that.”

“So you think you’re a bona fide prophet?”

“Not what I said.”

“I could give two shits about your magic tricks, so don’t worry,” Sherman says. “What’s in the box?”

Timothy leans forward. His hands cup the sides, only fingertips touching it. While Sherman might be some kind of door, crossing the threshold, he sees now, will cost too much.

He rises and tucks the box under his arm, stands, and heads for the door. "I should leave."

"The fuck, Kid? Really?"

Sherman kicks the recliner shut, spilling coffee on his khakis as he jumps up. "Goddamit," he says, hopping around, slapping at his pants with one hand. He drops the coffee cup, then loosens his belt and drops his pants, too.

"I'm sorry."

"Sit your ass down. Tell me what you want. I got up, made you coffee, put a goddamn tie on, and burned myself. All for you. So you're going to tell me what's in that goddamn box." He catches his breath, runs a hand through a patch of his hair. "And, by the way, I can curse in my own house. Trailer, I mean."

Timothy's free hand rests on the brass doorknob. He releases it now and steps across the room until he's back on the sofa, the box before him.

Sherman leaves his pants on the floor and plops onto the recliner.

Timothy opens the box. "I don't want to touch it. The oil from my fingers."

"What is it?"

"Supposed to be an Egyptian ostrakon. Well, Greek, but from Egypt."

Sherman purses his lips, interlocks his fingers over his tie. "Not really my specialty."

"I just want to find out how old it is."

Timothy grabs the box to shut it but the floor and walls rumble. Sherman smiles at him and puts his head back on the recliner, untangling his fingers and putting his hands on the armrests. Pictures of Sherman and Tracey shake on the walls. A glass falls from the counter in the kitchen and shatters. Sherman's eyes are closed. An earthquake, Timothy thinks, just before he hears the whistle blow, and the chug of the train. It sounds as if it'll tear through the trailer and kill them both. The lights blink off and on, and Sherman's laughing. He's wild, his eyes now open, gazing into Timothy's. The darkness of his open mouth seems larger than his face. Timothy buries his face into the sofa, pulls the box close to him, covers his ears, and braces himself.

Chapter 5

Timothy can't remember the last time he slept well. Expect night terrors, heart palpitations, bowel trouble, and a litany of other symptoms, the medics told him upon leaving. And get a therapist.

The flutters grow quicker in his chest. He struggles to breathe. He's calling out at night, never sure what he says, only the tail end of echoes remaining when he awakens. At Sherman's last night he was on his knees, head buried in the comforter hanging off the side of the sofa, afraid he'd die. He whispered there was too much to learn, and that it was too soon. *But what about Ferrell? It was too soon for him as well, wasn't it?*

#

Timothy makes his rounds, in and out of the nursing homes, visiting the shut-ins of the church. Purple-haired women and hunch-backed men welcome him back from the war, but are even more committed to chronicling exactly what happened at church on Sunday. They've heard the news. He gives them the clichés, mysterious ways, but knows they're also bent on seeing wonder-working in their lifetime.

He visits the hospital as well. He's learned from Mary Jo at church that a new drug has a couple of teenagers in fits. But they won't let him into the psych ward, so he wanders around the fluorescent hallways, paces in front of patients' rooms on the cardiac floor, trying to remember how to pray. Cecilia Gordon has an uncle in with a broken hip, so he pops into the room for a visit.

He lets Susannah have the space she needs, but he sees her--in the face of a nurse bringing soup to Cecilia's uncle, in the receptionist holding the phone to her face as he leaves the hospital, in the young woman crossing the parking lot as he gets into the Ranger.

On Wednesdays the deacons hold a meeting. They discuss the budget, plans for a hypothetical family life center (a subject of discussion for almost a decade), and outreach programs (though none is particularly interested in this brand of evangelism). Their complicity in any such evangelistic endeavour is always a front to satisfy the minister emboldened enough to "share the Gospel" outside of the church walls—which none of them, in all honesty, have much use for, not the older gentlemen anyway. Their concerns are their families and keeping the place going. If it were up to any of them, they'd continue church just as it has been for decades. There's no use in bringing anyone else, especially from the outside. "The outside" to them being mostly Latinos and African Americans.

Before the war, this was Timothy's least favorite part of serving. Whereas standing behind the pulpit offered him chance to live out his calling, allowing him to channel an otherworldly energy, the meetings brought him down to earth and swamped him in tedium. The deacons' meetings are, in fact, the most boring of all meetings in the history of church meetings, he is sure, and perhaps quite useless as well.

On this Wednesday, a small Channel 3 news van is parked under the maple in the churchyard. Timothy pulls into the grass lot and winds his way around to the side office. A stout, balding middle-aged man, wrestles himself out of the sliding door of the van and approaches him as he gets out of the Ranger.

"Ned Finkle with Channel 3. Can I have a minute?"

"What's this about?" Timothy says.

The man takes out a legal pad and sets to writing. "Reports that your pastor levitated."

"Did you see it?"

"No."

"Then why are you asking me about it?" Timothy says. He walks past and swings open the door to his office. In a semi-circle six deacons sit around his desk. Five of them have both feet on the floor. Donny has one leg propped on the other, his hands in his pockets. They're all in button-up shirts and jeans, except for Silas, who's wearing overalls, his cowboy hat in his lap.

"Hey Timothy," Silas says, nodding.

"Did you see the news truck?" Donny says.

Timothy walks around his desk and sits in the leatherback swivel chair. He's facing Herb Smith. Above Herb's head hangs Timothy's ordination certificate. Herb's the minutes taker for the deacons, has been for twenty years.

"We saw it," Terry Graham, a fairly new recruit, says. "People's stirred up."

"What's the first order of business?" Timothy says.

"I reckon it's the van," Donny says, getting up and fingering the blinds.

"Let's talk about the Family Life Center," Timothy says, hoping to lighten the mood.

"We can call the police. Private property," Terry says and pops his knuckles.

"He won't get what he wants," Timothy says. "Let's start with prayer. Silas?"

Silas nods and glances at Donny, waiting for him to sit. He doesn't, continuing to pace in front of the window. Silas leans forward and clasps his hands. "Lord, Father in heaven, we've come here today to seek counsel. Let your wisdom be ours. Amen."

Herb pulls his notepad from the floor and sets it on his knee.

Sal Turner, the oldest and most disagreeable of them, clears his throat and surveys the room. "I think the first order of business should be the Sunday service."

"I thought it was good," Timothy says.

Terry pops his knuckles, Silas hums, and Herb scribbles.

"But what you did up there," Sal says and clears again.

"What I did?"

"Let's approach it differently, Sal," Silas says.

"I think you have to give an account," Sal says. "People want to know what happened."

Herb's pencil moving across the notepad fills the silences.

"What do you think you saw?" Timothy says.

"Same thing I saw when you showed me and Silas out front the church. You was floating, Timothy. I ain't seen nothing like it," Donny says, returning from the window and plopping down in the folding chair.

"And what does that mean?" Timothy says, leaning back in the chair. "What does that mean to you?"

Donny looks at the others and bites the inside of his cheek. "I think you gotta tell us what it means."

"But isn't faith about working through it yourselves?"

Sal resituates himself on the metal chair and clears his throat. "Look, you don't see it every day. And as our spiritual leader, you have an obligation to tell us what it's about. For all we know you're doing circus tricks."

"They're not circus tricks," Timothy says, his hand slamming against the desk. He leans back, closes his eyes, puts a hand on his chest, and breathes in.

"You saw all the people who showed up," Harold Jenkins, typically silent in the meetings, says. He looks around the room to make sure he's not pushed any boundaries.

"If that were the case," Timothy says, "wouldn't I have done it again Sunday night?"

"He has a point," Herb says as he scribbles.

"First time I saw it, it didn't feel right," Donny says. "Even felt evil to me."

"Evil?" Timothy says.

Sal continues, "Only Jesus can perform miracles, preacher. He's the son of God."

"What about Pentecost? What about the apostle Paul? Or the other apostles? They performed miracles."

“That was a different time. The last pastor we had said the time of miracles was over and done with. If anyone claimed to perform miracles, they was a false prophet,” Sal says.

“You believe that?” Timothy says. “Did you hear the sermon?”

“Sand,” Harold Jenkins says. “I got a tape of it, too.”

“Are you saying what you did was of God?” Donny says.

“I’m saying that it might be,” Timothy says.

“Is it something you can control?” Sal says.

“I don’t know.”

“Is it a magic trick?” Herb says. “I’ve seen people do it on television.”

“If it ain’t God, and you don’t seem certain it is, it’s gotta be the devil,” Donny says.

“It’s either or?” Timothy says.

Terry cracks his knuckles, getting no sound, then leans forward and slaps both knees. “We might as well get to the point, Timothy. We can keep talking ‘bout it til we’re blue in the face, but it’d serve only our own curiosity. Nothing you can say either way is going to change these folks’ minds.”

“You don’t agree with us?” Sal says.

“I’m not sure what I think, but I know the majority rules, and my indecision won’t matter a hill of beans,” Terry says.

“Change their minds about what?” Timothy says.

Donny finally returns to his seat from the window. “We think now’s not the best time for you to come back. You’ve been through some things. We know you’re stressed and your mind has to have some time to get rest, to think clearly again.”

Sal clears, then, “We think you should resign.”

“For how long?” Timothy says.

“Until you’re better,” Sal says.

Herb scribbles. The motor of the news van revs. The sound trails off. Then only Herb’s scribbling again.

“So as soon as you see something you don’t understand, you run from it?” Timothy says.

“I think I understand good and well,” Donny says and points his finger at Timothy. “You’ve brought something evil--”

Timothy jolts upright, hands clenched in fists.

All but Herb look up. His hand’s on fire across the notebook.

“Let’s not take it that far,” Silas says, scowling at Donny.

“Reckon it’s best you not visit the church anymore, either,” Donny says.

“They just don’t think it’s right,” Terry says.

Silas hesitates, looks up at Timothy, then hums in agreement.

“Harold? Herb?” Timothy says, waiting for confirmation.

Harold nods.

They wait for the question to register with Herb. Once he’s lain down the pencil, he lifts his head and nods, too.

#

It’s Thursday night, and she’s sure The Lofts—which are really not lofts at all, but a series of interconnecting apartments for university students—is in full swing, people halfway drunk, making out in corners, vegging out in front of the TV and stereo.

Rayne parks the Impala on the curb and grabs the bottle of schnapps she’s bought from the liquor store on the way.

Her heels clink on the sidewalk.

At the apartment complex, a shaggy-haired teenager, drunk off his ass, swings open the door. “What’s up?”

She takes her chances. “Brittany invited me.”

“Come on in.”

She hands him the bottle. He lifts it like a trophy and unscrews the cap.

“Goldschläger!”

A couple make out on the stairs in the foyer. A thumping dance number pounds the walls of the common room at high decibels. The dimly lit spaces make it hard to navigate. She can’t stand still, though. On a normal night she’d bust this place, issue at least a dozen CUA’s and be done with it.

“Sorry. Excuse me.”

If things go bad, Darrell’s on the other end of her handheld and parked down the street.

“Hey there,”

“Hi yourself,” Rayne says to the boy standing in front of her now. He’s somehow managed to wrap a Chi Phi tee shirt over an absurd amount of muscle.

He yells over the music. “You come here a lot?”

A girl, obviously drunk, bumps into her, pushing her into him. “No, you?”

“I live here. Can’t hear myself think.”

“Why aren’t you in the Chi Phi house?”

I'm working on it," he says. "Aren't you a little, well..."

"Old?"

"Mature?"

"Clever boy."

"Let me get you a drink. What you have?"

"Rum and coke."

"Be right back."

She pushes her way into the common room, where a group of boys turn up shot glasses they've lifted from a ping-pong table.

A cluster of kids stands in the corner of the room, huddled around, obscuring what holds their point of interest with a wall of polos. She elbows through, grabbing a girl's drink from her hand and scurrying between two guys so she doesn't have time to know what's happened.

"Hey guys."

In front of them a twenty-something frat boy, ball cap turned backwards on his head, tee shirt tucked neatly into his pants, sits lifeless on the floor. They wave their hands in his face, clap, and laugh.

"Shit's sick," one of them says.

"For real. What is it?"

"No idea."

"It's Vision," another says.

She steps in, turning her face upward to their towering bodies. "I'll have what he's having. I wanna be out."

"I can take you out," one of them says.

She leans into the one who's said it. "You wish."

They turn their attention back to the zombie.

"I'm sticking with beer," one of them says and raises his Coors into the air.

She's eager, too eager. "Where can you get it?"

"It comes to you, honey."

"Big fucking mystery."

"Someone here's got it," another says.

She leans over and grabs the boy's hat and pulls it over her head. "I can pay."

They aren't interested. They disperse as she stares ahead into the young man's eyes. His gaze is fixed behind her, at the moving bodies, beer pong, the darkness of the

apartment. She leans over him again, reaches into his pants pockets, takes his wallet, and opens it. Brian Stokes. She slides it back in.

Between dance numbers, Cat Stevens's voice sings from inside her purse. The ringtone on her phone. It's "The Wind."

Before she has a chance to answer it, someone behind hollers, "The fuck you doing?"

It's the girl whose drink she'd stolen.

The athletic boy she'd met earlier shows up holding two drinks. She takes one of them and hands it to the angry girl. "All yours."

"I was looking all over for you," the boy says.

"This bitch was in my boyfriend's pants."

The guy raises his eyebrows. "What?"

Before Rayne knows it, the girl has knocked the drink out of her hand and jumped her. The ballcap falls as they twirl around the corner, bumping into party-goes. The girl pulls Rayne's hair, slaps her--lucky shots—before Rayne gets her on the ground, her knee in her back as if about to cuff her.

"Someone call the cops," the girl squeals.

Rayne pushes the girl's head into the wooden floor. "Yeah, someone call the fucking cops. This is the perfect place for the cops to show up."

The crowd forms a semi-circle around them.

"I'm in no fucking mood to play. Where'd your boyfriend get that shit?"

"Hell if I know. Let me up."

"Come on, get off her," Rayne's new friend yells.

Rayne notices her blouse hanging open. She bears her knee into the small of the girl's back. "Tell me."

"Some guy. Came in here an hour ago."

"What'd he look like?"

"Military boots, black jeans, long black hair. Don't know his name."

"And what's your name?"

"Brittany."

"Figures. Brittany what?"

"Flowers."

She eases up and stands. "Thanks for the drink," she says to the guy in front of her, taking a long swig. "I didn't catch your name."

"You're crazy," he says.

“It was nice to meet you.”

“Can I get your number?” he calls as Rayne walks away.

Cat Stevens sings again as she edges through the crowd. She buries her hand into the purse and pulls out the cell. “Dad?” She uses her free hand to plug an ear.

“Rayne, just want to check on you. Your mom and I been worried. You haven’t called,” he says and breaks into a coughing fit.

“I’m fine, Dad,” she says. “I’ll call you later.”

The phone back in her purse, she wanders upstairs. Little name tags are posted next to the doors. The third one down reads “Brian Stokes.” Convenient.

She opens the door. Vinyl records are stacked against the wall. There’s a small television, video game console, and an aquarium.

On the floor around a guitar amp are several tiny envelopes, just like the one she’d found in Skylar’s purse. A composition notebook lies open on the amp. She picks it up and flips through. On one of the pages, he’s doodled several of his own versions of Munch’s “The Scream.”

She throws down the book and heads downstairs and out the door. Through the rain she makes her way down the street to Darrell, who’s sitting in his patrol car smoking.

“Hey handsome,” she says through the half-opened passenger’s window.

“Get the goods?”

“What do you think?” She jerks open the door and plops down in the seat. “Let me have one of those.”

He passes her a cigarette and holds out his lighter. She takes a deep drag and blows it out the window. “I pinned a sorority sister to the ground, caused a scene.”

He half laugh then hums. “I didn’t think this was such a good idea.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“I think I did, Rayne, but I don’t think you were listening.”

“It’s called Vision. There’s a kid in there on it.”

“Easy, then,” Darrell says. “Set up surveillance, see who’s in and out.”

“Hard to pull off. I got a description, though.”

“Well, that’s something...” he says, drumming his free hand on the steering wheel.

#

Birthday streamers hang from the ceiling of the trailer. Tracey’s moved the circular table from the kitchen into the living room. The coffee table’s pushed against the sofa to make room for it. One candle sits atop the table.

Sherman sets down his satchel by the front door. Tracey's whistling from the kitchen, her head obscured by the cabinets.

"What's all this?" he says, but the exhaust fan above the microwave drowns him out.

She ducks down and spots him. "You remembered!" she says and flips off the exhaust.

"Remembered what?"

"You're wearing your suit and everything."

"It's your birthday?" Sherman says, walking to the kitchen.

"Don't be silly," she says and hugs him. "Two years today."

"You didn't have to do all this."

"Go sit down. I made your favorite."

He's just back from Atlanta where he'd taken Timothy's snake box and broken pot to Calvin Green at Georgia State University. Calvin was affable as always, but he'd asked Sherman too many questions about what'd happened—mostly "what the fuck, Sherman?"—so he's sour. He pulls the metal chair out from the table and plops down.

Tracey sets a bowl of spaghetti in front of him and heads back for the rest.

"I didn't get you anything, Tracey."

She sets down two Styrofoam cups and pours a bottle of Boone's Farm red into them. "We really need to get some wine glasses."

"Did you hear me?"

"We could go to IKEA. They have cheap wine glasses, you know."

"We're not married, Tracey."

"Not yet, we're not. But it's still a good day, isn't it?"

"I guess so," he says, looking down at the spaghetti. "I'm sorry I didn't get you anything."

She walks to the door and flips off the living room light. Only the candle illuminates the room now. "Well, I didn't get you nothing special. You can just take me to Ikea, okay?"

"Did we celebrate it last year?"

"No, you said you didn't want to."

"Why are we celebrating this year?"

"I was going through some of my stuff today and found an old calendar where I'd marked the day we got together."

"And you expected me to remember, too?"

“Not really, no, but I wanted to do something nice,” she says. She sits down across from him and raises the cup. “To two more years and many more,” she says.

Sherman forces a smile and bumps his cup against hers. “Many more.”

They divvy out the spaghetti. The sauce is thin, as usual, and he wishes she’d not mixed it with the pasta but let him spread it over the noodles himself.

“You know why I was going through my stuff?”

Sherman shakes his head, his mouth full.

“I was looking for my birth certificate and my immunization forms. I’m going to enroll at Palaver U again in January.”

Sherman stops mid-chew and looks at her over the glow of the candle. He swallows the glob in his mouth. “You’re going back to school?”

She smiles and lunges into the pasta with her fork. “Well, why not? I want to do something for myself. Like I was saying the other day, all I got are the plants out there, you know? And I’m sick of my online job. I thought maybe I could study horticulture or something.”

“Wish I could,” Sherman says, suddenly enraged that he’s using a Styrofoam cup.

“You’ve already gone as high as you can go, haven’t you? Anything above a Ph.D.? she says.

“Not a degree, no.”

“There you go. You’ve done it all.”

“Well, what do I got?”

“You got a car. You got a place to live.”

“But it’s not mine.” He’d not meant to say it.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean this place ain’t yours?” she says.

“If you’re going back to school, the first thing you need to learn is that ‘ain’t’ isn’t a word.”

She huffs and drops the collection of noodles she’s gathered on her fork. “Seeing all my friends the other day, Sherman, well, it did something.”

“They’re in school?”

“They’re finished. Elementary school teachers.”

“Better watch what they say on Facebook, then. I thought they were thirteen.”

“Karen makes almost forty thousand dollars,” Tracey says, venturing into the noodles again.

“You’ll have to get off the coke, you know.”

“That’s your shit.”

“Oh, right.”

“I got just two years left. It’d be stupid not to finish.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“But, I have to tell you something,” she says. “And I’m serious.”

Sherman leans back in his chair, hoists the cup to his mouth and nods, watching her over the rim.

“I’m absolutely done with Waller. And Jack, whoever that is.”

He sets down the cup. “I don’t have much of a choice.”

“But you can’t force me,” she says.

“You volunteered.”

“Why are you being like this?”

“I can’t be any other way.”

“So rather than get out of the drugs, you’d just get rid of me?”

“You don’t understand the half of it.”

She rises from the table. She stacks the half-eaten plates of spaghetti and rushes to the kitchen. Her head is obscured by the cabinets again. “Maybe I should find my own place to live.”

Sherman wants to apologize. He’s usually given to compromise when it comes to diffusing tense confrontations. And, like her, he wants to say “screw it,” too, but this is the life given to him. He can’t tell her the truth. She’d leave anyway—and think less of him, perhaps thinking nothing at all.

“I’m going out,” he says, wadding a paper towel into a ball and throwing it onto the table.

“I might be gone,” she calls behind him. “Happy fucking anniversary.”

#

There are cars speeding through the square, middle-class hipster kids sucking cigarettes under the awning of the Corner Bistro, frat boys raising their voices at the Irish Bred Pub, the distant murmur of a rock band beating the cage of the Alley Cat, Halloween lights strung on the lamp posts, glowing with portentous, hazy auras of light, late-night coffee drinkers huddled beneath umbrellas, walking to cars, to cabs, to each other, dumpsters overfull in parking lots from the weekend crowd. At a crosswalk Sherman’s jostled by pedestrians because he hasn’t noticed, though he stares ahead fixed on the

crosswalk sign, that the light has changed, that it's okay to move again, to step into the puddle of water before him and make his way across the street to Millie's.

The eight o'clock crowd is thin. The bartender, Delinda, once Sherman's top-heavy dream, moves back and forth behind the bar. Before losing his job, Sherman had made his way here often, so often that Delinda knew the pattern of his nights. Sherman rarely said anything, but she'd serve exactly what he wanted. He'd start with a rum and coke, move on to screwdrivers, double whiskeys, and finish the night with a Budweiser. On the rare occasion he'd veer from the routine, she'd shake her head and say something about his poor students who needed him to be clear-headed in the morning because he had "learning to give them."

Delinda wears the same tight denim jeans and a blouse that hangs open at her chest, which have always been welcome sights for Sherman, particularly when she leans over to grab something from the floor or the tiny refrigerator under the bar.

Tonight it's a Hawaiian-inspired blouse. She's grabbing something from under the bar and Sherman can't help but look, always taken by negative spaces, cleavage, crack, and, once upon a time, academia. He perches on the barstool, and Delinda smiles, reaches for the glass, the rum, and places the tap hose in and pours the coke.

"Long time," she says.

"You haven't changed."

"How's the students?"

"Aw, I got out of that racket." He turns up the drink, imagining a smaller version of himself rappelling down the black line between her breasts.

He surveys the room. Greasy fingers of sweat soaked-mechanics, pseudo cowboys, farmers, utility and construction workers grip mugs, beer cans.

Noise from passing cars swims into the bar as the entrance opens. Sherman's peering at the figure, a silhouette until it walks under one of the domed fixtures. It's Rayne Hammondtree, old love, perhaps sworn enemy.

Remembering their recent exchange, pleasant enough, he waves her over. She's stumbling a bit and must balance herself on the bar. Once she's steady, she eases down onto the bar stool beside him.

"We meet again," she says and nods at Delinda. "Screwdriver."

Delinda sets off in a frenzied march around the bar.

"Not looking well."

"Back at you. Least you're dressed to the hilt."

Cheap Trick's "Surrender" starts up on the jukebox.

“Oh, God, this song. They played this at all our dances. Remember?”

“I never liked it.”

“What did you like?”

“Bob Seger. Has to be Bob Seger.”

“Oh, I remember. You wouldn’t stop playing ‘You’ll Accomp’ny Me.’ Even made me a mixtape with that on it.”

Delinda sets down a screwdriver and Rayne turns it up.

“He’s got it down. So many of his songs follow the trajectory of life. I like him now for different reasons than I liked him then.”

“Oh really?”

“For real. You start out in the back of a Chevy, or on a motorcycle, a little blue and feeling the angst of youth but finding ways to manage it with cars, booze, and sex. Then, you get to a point where you’re tired, fed up, and start looking backward. You know, the nostalgic bent. Then, after all the structure of youth is gone, (verse chorus/verse chorus) and all the sentimental nostalgia has spent itself, what do you do? You hoop and holler, and the old riffs play underneath you. You’re howling because that’s all you got left.” He’s swinging his arms as he speaks, as if he’s back in the classroom. “You don’t even know what the fuck you’re saying, you’re just saying the same things over and over, improvising. And, then at the end, when you’re screaming ‘I remember,’ it’s not sentimental at all. It’s angry.”

“You think those are the options? Hopelessness and anger?”

Delinda places a screwdriver in front of Sherman as well.

Sherman points to his balding head. “You got anything better?”

Rayne laughs and lifts the glass to her lips.

Sherman turns on the stool to survey the room. “This place is something. First integrated restaurant in Palaver. At the time it wasn’t Millie’s but a local diner. Burned down in ‘66, probably KKK, but the brick remained, so they gutted the ash heaps from inside and reconstructed the place, turning it into a small hardware store. It was that until the nineties when Mr. Bellamy forgot to pay his taxes for fifteen years and had to shut the place down. Millie bought it in 1997, the same year I finished my Master’s.”

He knows she isn’t listening to his treatise on Millie’s. “I’m stuck,” he says, turning back around.

“I know how that feels.”

He waves away the next drink Delinda sets down. “So... what are you stuck on?”

“Eh, case stuff.”

“Which means you can’t really tell me.”

Coins jangle as they’re fed into the jukebox. “Neon Moon” starts up.

“I typically hate country music, but this is a good ‘un.”

“This one ain’t so bad.”

Drunken dancers sway between the tables.

“Quite a scene,” Sherman says and stands. He extends his hand. “Come on, let’s dance.”

“Oh, God no.”

“Come on, just one.”

He’s surprised when her hand meets his. It’s cold and wet from the condensation on the glasses. He helps her up. She plants her feet and, once she’s decided she can walk, they amble to a clear space between the bar and dining area. She leans her head against him, and he places his hands on her waist. They move in slow circles.

“There’s this new drug going around,” she says.

Sherman’s stomach turns. He moves his hand to her back, pulls her in closer, and remembers the pills in his coat pocket.

“Puts these kids in some kind of trance. We got kids in the psych ward. They forget who they are. Then they get suicidal. Doesn’t make any sense.”

“Who the fuck would want to do that?”

“Doesn’t seem like an ideal business plan, huh? Maybe they want something else.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called Vision,” she says, then, “Little too close, buddy.”

Sherman hadn’t realized how close he had pulled her to him.

“How did you find out about it?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you any of this.” She lifts her head. “Let’s change the subject.”

“Okay,” he says, relieved. “How’s your family?”

“God. I don’t want to talk about them either. I’d been doing a good job of forgetting shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Dad’s dying, Sherman.”

“Jesus, why?”

“He’s old.”

“More specifically?”

“It’s cancer, and he won’t take treatment, says he doesn’t want to bother.”

“How’s your mother taking it?”

“The same. Still seeing stuff.”

“I’m sorry, Rayne,” he says, thinking of his own parents, long gone.

He buries his head in her hair and breathes in.

“You’re not wearing Eternity anymore.”

“You can’t freeze time, Sherman.”

“I gotta find a way out of this.”

“Our dance?”

“Not that, not that at all. I’m sorry that this happened to me. It’s hard to put a name to it.”

“Failure.”

“Let’s just be brutally honest.”

“You caused it. That’s different.”

“Maybe.”

“I know firsthand. You’ve always wanted to sabotage anything good. Where does that come from?”

“Pot. Kettle. Black,” he says, counting five circles, enough to dizzy him, even if they’re slow circles. He steps back and grabs her shoulders. “It was good to see you, really. Too long. Better get back, though.”

“Back where?” she says.

“Tracey’s going to kill me.”

He places twenty dollars on the bar and walks to the door. As he does, Waller enters and shoulders him, heading to the bar. Sherman stops and turns. Waller eyes him from the bar. Rayne takes a seat next to him. Waller winks and Sherman turns and throws open the door, disappearing into the drizzle.

Chapter 6

She's seen him before, the thick neck and shiny baldhead, but can't place him. He buys her a drink. "No thanks," she tells Delinda. The bartender smiles as if to say she understands.

The place has quieted. The other drunken dancers have stumbled back to their booths and stools at the bar.

Rayne knows she should've followed Sherman. She's swimming again, every movement sluggish and deliberate. She's stupid for pushing him. It doesn't matter, whatever has become of him was his own doing--or undoing.

The man's fingers are thick, maybe swollen. He's not bothered to clean under his fingernails. She looks at the peeling polish on her own.

He orders a double Makers and hunches over, elbows on the bar, leering at Delinda.

Cutting yourself off?" he says to Rayne, without looking at her.

"I've had a bit much."

His face is pock-marked with acne scars. She thinks he's in his mid-fifties, maybe older.

"Sherman's a good man. Know him?"

"Used to."

"The Professor," he says and chuckles.

Delinda sets the bourbon before him and he turns it up.

"Taught me a lot." He clinks the glass against the bar, nodding to Delinda to fetch another. His stool squeaks as he swivels to face her. "You're a cop, ain't you? Seen you around. You was up at the square the other day. Saw you with that girl."

He didn't teach you how to speak properly.

Rayne stares at Delinda, who's busied herself with a dishtowel and a line of shot glasses.

"I know where there's more like her. The staring folks."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He nods and returns to his drink. "Ain't this your job?"

Every noise feels like a punctuation mark: the clatter of patrons working to lift themselves out of the booths, to leave, to piss, to order another, and in front of her, Delinda with the tap and the bottles. She should call Darrell, but her phone's not on her. They should take this motherfucker in.

Then a tune played by a pure, practiced whistle glides through the place. The melody is familiar. The man beside her still stares ahead, and out of his pursed lips the old hymn rises into the room.

She sings it in her head.

“There is a fountain filled with blood

Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins

And sinners plunged beneath that flood

Lose all their guilty stains”

She’s back at church, twenty-five years ago, clutching the backs of pews, singing this song, and others, with conviction, with faith.

It wasn’t long after she started high school she’d abandoned God. She’d never told her parents, or anyone for that matter. Since she’d been on her own she visited church, but it was only for her parents. There was no way to believe, not now.

“Why all the blood?” she says into the bar, to no one in particular.

The man continues the tune. He lifts his glass after he finishes the refrain, takes a drink, and begins again.

“I love this song,” Delinda says not looking up. “Don’t hear many hymns in here.”

“You a church-goer?” Rayne asks, trying to block it out.

“Used to be. Church is so boring. And the church my parents took me to is full of old folks.”

“Baptist?”

“Backwoods.”

“Me, too.”

The man rises from his stool and puts money down on the counter. He nods to Rayne and walks to the door, shutting it behind him gently, just as he finishes the second time through.

“Gives me the heebie geebies,” Delinda says.

“Come in here a lot?”

“Never seen him.”

“Care if I use your phone?” Rayne says.

She calls Darrell but is sent straight to voicemail. She should call the office, tell Chief about the incident, she knows. But she’s drunk again. She doesn’t pretend well.

Regretting her trip to Millie’s—too much wasted time--she pays Delinda and heads for the door, leaving just as “Freebird” fires up on the jukebox. *Fucking Lynyrd Skynyrd*.

Pyramids of light fall from the streetlamps in the haze. She doesn't have an umbrella, so she pulls her arms out of her jacket and lifts it overhead. As she exits the parking lot, lifting a foot onto the curb and into the grass, she's jerked backwards, a hand grabbing her face.

#

His hands clasped, his elbows on the seat of the metal chair, Timothy prays—or tries to. There's a mechanism that, since Iraq, forces him to yawn when he prays in private. It might be that he prays from his chest and shoulders and concentrates his energy upon the same muscles that work to make him cry and this, in turn, leads him to yawn. It doesn't make sense. He isn't sure, but it worries him.

Is it any use to pray? Doesn't God already know the yearning of the heart?

No, it's for him, not for God.

He needs to feel better, but everything has changed. It is as if his mind has been stretched, enlarged, or this place has shrunk. Either way, it's incongruous to him now. And the people know it, too.

So he weeps and launches prayers to the ceiling from that part of him that would rather sleep. He thinks of Baudelaire and the chain-smoking beast yawning for the guillotine and hopes to God that's not what's nesting under his sternum.

The hum of the refrigerator is like a distant train. He turns and sits, his neck against the chair. He considers calling Susannah.

Something calls to him, as deep calls to deep. He can't shake it. His hands tremble with endless energy. He must speak, he thinks. Now that they've silenced him, now, more than ever, the truth must be heard.

But he's not fooling himself. Maybe it's here that he's lost. The truth, he knows now, is elusive. Love. God. Whatever abstraction's broken on the table, you can't put its pieces back together.

But levitation is a thin place, a place of connection, he thinks. It's a kind of miracle, a way of showing.

But showing what? And is it even real? Is he a hoax? Does he know?

He cannot even fathom his own abilities, his Blessedness—or his powers for contrivance.

He's up on his feet now, pacing. He could read, but his mind teems. There's too much. He must tell. He must stop the bridegroom before going into the wedding. There's so much to say.

He locks the door and heads downstairs. The rain hasn't let up. He walks down to the drive and around the brick gate lining the complex. He wanders down to the Walgreens and stands beside Susannah's car. She's at the register, ringing up folks. They bring their bags outside, load them into cars. It's not busy, but there are enough people to listen.

If he had a sign, he'd hold it up to them, like the crazy folks prophesying doomsday he sees in films. "A prophet's not regarded in his own country," he says to a man lumbering outside and lighting a cigarette.

"Tell me about it," the man says and cackles.

"They turned me out," Timothy says.

"You gotta keep at it," the man says. "Don't give up."

"What if they don't listen?"

"They're always listening. They just don't know what to do with it."

A small group gathers around him as he speaks. "What are you seeking?"

"I came for a candy bar," a young man, no more than fifteen, says.

"Condoms," another says.

"Where do you go when you're pushed out?" Timothy says.

"Pushed out of what?" the teenager says.

"The places."

"You're crazy," someone hollers, but all Timothy hears are gunshots. He's no longer at Walgreens, far from it, and a storm descends on all of them now and he's at the center of it, his arms swinging. They're laughing because they don't understand. He's compelled to run, to fire, to hide, to give voice to those choking on sand.

"What the hell, Timothy?" Susannah says and shakes him. Her hands are on his shoulders. Everyone's gone now.

"I was preaching, Susannah."

Her hair is bunched into a ponytail again. She's innocent. She's like the blue apron tied at her back.

"No one's here, Timothy. Are you okay?"

Timothy braces himself against her car and eases down, sitting on the asphalt.

"They fired me."

"The church?"

"I showed them too much."

"People are scared of you," she says.

"Don't you need to work? I didn't want to interrupt you."

“We’re closed now. And yes you did.”

He turns and clutches her, pulls her close, their heads against the bumper of her car. “I need something. The double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Am I safe?”

“Am I?” she says and kisses his neck.

#

After adjusting to the dim light, her eyes make out four figures in the room. One sits in a recliner, eyes fixed on a Bob Marley poster across the way. Another stands in the center of the room, looking up at the incandescent bulb hanging from the ceiling. There’s a girl, too, at the opposite side of the room with a book in her hands. She’s peering at the book, but her eyes aren’t moving. One more, sitting on the floor and against the opposite wall, is slouched over.

Rayne’s hands are tied behind her back, her feet tied at the ankles. She’s against the wall. She tries to holler but realizes she’s gagged as well. The room has no windows. There’s a kitchen to the left side and a hallway. Beside that, there’s a giant vault, a bank vault, she thinks. She’s underground. She squirms, trying to loosen herself from the rope around her hands.

The figures don’t move. Except for her, nothing moves. All is quiet. She realizes she’s not tied into place. Along the floor, like a snake, on her side, moving her arms and legs and her torso, she pushes herself away from the wall. The woman in the corner is indifferent. So, too, is the Bob Marley gawker. The kid slouched over is in a dream. They’re all on Vision, she knows. She rests her head on the floor and tries to slow her breathing, hissing through her nose. She pushes farther, to the feet of the figure in the center and rolls against his legs. She rolls away and pushes herself to him again, hoping she can awaken him. His legs give way. He tumbles over her and falls on the other side, his eyes open, his hair falling across his face. *Cliff*.

The song, the whistle, fills the room. “There is a fountain filled with blood.”

The light goes out.

Footsteps clomp across the floor. Heavy, deliberate breaths. There’s something, else, too, metallic, scraping across the concrete.

#

Sherman hurries back and forth from the closet to an open suitcase on the bed, throwing clothes in.

“Will you tell me what’s going on?” Tracey says.

“You know that great idea you had about going to school?”

“Okay.”

“You should do it. But fuck Palaver U. Let’s do what you said. Let’s go to California. I got enough money to get us out there. Then you can go to school there.”

“Did something happen?”

“Will you just fucking pack a suitcase?” he says. “You’re beautiful and smart, fringe and all, but you need to pack a goddamn suitcase.”

She pulls an overnight bag from the top of the closet.

“Everything you can take.”

“I don’t have another suitcase.”

“Throw shit in here,” he says, pointing to his suitcase. “Woman, do you have any sense of urgency?”

“Maybe I should go to Mama’s.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“What? Why? You said they’d never kill anyone.”

“I lied.”

Tracey grabs an armful of clothes from the closet and throws it in the suitcase. She goes to the dresser and pulls out her panties and bras and throws them in, too.

“Save room for necessities,” Sherman says, throwing out a leopard print thong.

Tracey takes the shotgun set against the wall and goes to the window.

“I saw Waller tonight at Millie’s. He went in and sat down by Rayne,” Sherman says.

“Your ex?”

“Yes.”

She pokes through the blinds. “What were you doing at the bar with your ex?”

“She just happened to be there.”

“So why the frenzy?”

“Shit’s going to get ugly. He knows she’s on his trail. And that drug we’ve been giving out, well—”

“I’ve been giving out.”

“Whatever. It’s making kids sick, mental.”

“The fuck?”

“I don’t know what they’re doing. You know where the pills are?”

“In the kitchen drawer.”

“Get them and flush them. No trace. The cocaine, too.”

She scrambles out of the room, the gun still in her hand. She appears at the doorway again.

“What is it?”

“I love you, Sherman.”

“Urgency!”

She bites her bottom lip at him and disappears.

Sherman rummages through his drawers, taking out Quaaludes and speed, the dime bags, and a small bag of crystal. He empties them into the back toilet and flushes. He’s not sure whom he fears more, Waller or Rayne. Both will have questions, he’s sure. Both will want to visit, one sooner than the other.

When he starts to zip up the suitcase, the lights flicker and go out.

The air conditioner drones to a halt. The refrigerator dies. Silence swallows the trailer.

“Tracey?” he calls out.

“Sherman?”

“Get the flashlight from under the sink,” he hollers.

“Can’t see shit.”

“That’s why you need the—”

He stumbles over an end table and falls to the floor.

“I’m scared, Sherman. Don’t *you* have any sense of urgency?”

“You’re the one with the gun.”

A heavy thump sounds from the living room, the front door bashing the wall, he knows. And he knows it isn’t the cops. He crawls to the hallway, feeling his way along the walls in the dark.

“Declare ye among the nations, and publish, and set up a standard; publish, and conceal not: say, Babylon is taken, Bel is confounded, Merodach is broken in pieces; her idols are confounded, her images are broken in pieces,” says a voice.

Whether it’s Jack or Waller, he’s not sure. The shotgun fires. Tracey screams. Sherman’s up on his feet, feeling his way into the living room. The door’s open, and the storm door patters against the jamb. Outside, the ferns have been thrown onto the porch, the flower pots kicked over. The taillights of the pickup disappear down his drive. Pulling out his keys, Sherman darts toward his car. As he turns the engine and puts it in drive, the bottom rumbles and his tires grate against the gravel. Flat. “Fuck,” he cries and punches the steering wheel.

#

Rayne’s drenched in sweat. She gasps for breath and squirms again, pushing and pushing until she’s on the floor. But she finds her arms are free, her legs, too. She’s no

longer gagged. Above her is a bed, her bed. It's morning. Slats of light fall onto the wooden floor from the tall window.

She pushes herself up from the floor. A piece of notebook paper lies across her pillow. Catching her breath, she lifts it to her face and turns it so that the light from outside illuminates the script. The handwriting is ancient, she thinks. The letters are well-formed, florid even.

Dear Rayne Hammondtree,

You done seen what I can do, what I done.

I done done a lot more, too. So I'm gonna help you out.

Sherman Thomas

Nathan Warren

Trevor Toombs

Aplin Tucker

I reckon Sherman Thomas's a surprise, huh? All cocksuckers. Horsemen cocksuckers. Palaver done had it comin' for years.

-No One

The Gospel According to No One

After I came home from the hospital, all laid up in the bed, she so broken at the death of your suit-wearing new man, Mama hanged herself from the rafter, swinging slightly back and forth, side to side. I stood there watching her when I came out of the bedroom one morning. She was a pendulum counting the time, counting the time of enlightenment for me, see? You ushered me into the true house of mourning, where I tasted true eternal emptiness, about the only righteous thing y'all ever done for no one.

Ya'll sent me to the Gentle Shepherd. I spent my time there as a willing student, even as others taunted me and made me feel like the mark on my head was a blight upon the community. When a group of boys pushed me down outside by the oleanders that lined the brick wall of the Gentle Shepherd, Mr. Rathel sat me down, told me that I had a mark to live with, that some people wouldn't understand it, that I was strange to them, but that Cain was marked, too, but that Cain's curse was also a blessing because God told Cain that no one could hurt him, and that it was a sign, albeit a mysterious sign, of provision. I told Mr. Rathel that it didn't make much sense to me, seeing as how I didn't kill my brother. "No, you didn't," he said and put his hand on my knee. He was a fat man who had to tie his ties an extra foot longer than an average man so that they'd come down to his waist. And that was all he said, so I grew up believing that I was cursed, and that the curse was somehow a good curse, that I should wear it with pride. For years I believed this and wore my mark as a sign of providential care. That was long before I was conscious of being no one.

Chapter 7

His final morning alive Ferrell slid the alabaster box out from his bunk, opened it, and pulled out the fragment.

While Timothy cleaned his rifle, Ferrell spoke about the spells again, said that the Greeks in Egypt believed you could call upon the name of Jesus for all kinds of things. They used Jesus for casting out demons, falling in love, and even for laxatives. There was even one for procuring a male lover. Ferrell laughed when he told Timothy. “Bet the Baptists will love that one. But this one’s a healing spell.”

Timothy was still cleaning his rifle, not looking at Ferrell or the box. “What’s it say?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I want you to have it.”

“No, Ferrell.”

“Sell it on eBay. I don’t care.”

“Why do you want me to have it?”

“Man, out of all the shit we’ve been through. If you weren’t around, I’d have lost my mind. You know? Call it a thanks or something.”

Timothy sets the gun against the bed. “So what’s the story?”

Ferrell holds out the ostrakon in his palm. “You have to make up your own. What my father says. Figure out the people behind the objects, you know? That’s what’s important. That’s where the power is.”

“What kind of story?”

“I don’t know, man. One that makes you happy? Or one that’s true. It’d be nice if they could be the same thing, huh?” he said and laughed. “In my story an old woman’s son pleads with a vendor in the market for the vase. His mother is there beside him, on his arm. They know that the spells can heal. Her son takes the vase and puts it in her hands, tells her what it is. The old woman begs the vendor to let them have it, or, at the very least, to discount the price. Business is good, though, and the vendor knows he can get double what she wants it for, so he shoos her away and says, “You might go blind but I will not go poor.”

“And she and her son turn and shake their heads.”

“Then all of his fucking family dies, the vendor’s.”

“What?”

“They all die.”

“Because he didn’t give it to her?”

“No, because the place is pillaged and burned to the ground. The vendor dies, too.”

“Whoa.”

“Sucks, huh? But the woman and her son don’t die. She’s not harmed a bit. She’s snug in her bed in the morning. When her son gets up, he wanders the streets and finds the vase.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. The vendor’s house?”

“He knows where they live?”

“I haven’t thought it through that much. But he finds it,” Ferrell said. “Maybe the vendor is actually the woman’s son, too. The two men are brothers, estranged, though, because of an old conflict between them.

“Okay.”

“She reads the words over and over on the vase, and her eyes get better. She’s healed.”

“But the city’s destroyed.”

“Sometimes you don’t want to see, huh? So, her son takes the vase and tries to sell it in a neighboring village, but no one wants it. They say they can see that it’s cursed. So, the man buries it.”

“That’s it?”

“Fin.”

“That’s hardly happy.”

“But it’s interesting, right?”

#

The Humvee at the front of the convoy had stopped at least twice to defuse explosives on the road.

Between stops Ferrell had livened the cab with stories about his grandfather in New York.

“Tommy Blackfinger dragged in a dude who’d stole a Greek bust from my grandfather, knifed him, started on the lip, moved all the way down to the fucking navel. His intestines and all dropped out. And, man, this other time...”

The sun falling now, in a cluster of mud huts, middle of nowhere, the troops unloaded to set up camp, a few posting on the perimeter.

The temperature had risen to 135 degrees.

Timothy and Ferrell dismounted the Humvee, guns in the air.

Sweat formed at their temples.

“I’ve never been to New York,” Timothy said.

“You’ll visit me,” Ferrell said, punching Timothy’s shoulder as they walked the length of one of the houses. “I gotta piss,” he said, running up ahead.

Ferrell rounded the corner while Timothy knelt to tie his bootlaces.

There was a sudden crack of thunder. The force blew out the side of the hut ahead and hurled Timothy onto his back. His ears rang.

Dust covered him.

He wrangled about but couldn’t see.

On his hands and knees he tried to find Ferrell, wanted to touch him.

Nothing but sand and ash and pieces—of what, he didn’t know—filled his hands.

It happened in acronyms. IED. TIC. MEDEVAC.

Blowed up.

The troops scrambled about, hollered, but they might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Everything covered by moon dust.

#

Back in the CHU, Timothy rummaged through Ferrell’s duffel bag. There was a photograph of his family, a dream catcher, and the box. He put the box in his own bag.

#

He should’ve gone home. He’d been urged to see a doctor upon his discharge. But if he could be fixed, he thought, it would take more than rehearsed conversation or chemicals. He had to move.

In Bethlehem he waited in line to see the Church of the Nativity, then was herded through elbow to elbow with tourists, suffocated, as the guide explained the history of the church, why it’s thought the Grotto beneath is the birthplace of Christ. “No one knows for sure, of course,” the man said and laughed. His group, mostly Americans, were rapturous. “I feel the spirit,” Timothy overhead one of the men say, tears in his eyes.

At the Western Wall in Jerusalem, it was much the same. Men in fedoras bowed to the wall and stuffed prayers into its crevices. Too many people, too much racket.

#

From Jerusalem, he travelled to Rome, where he took the ostrakon to a Greek scholar, a shaggy-headed man with wire-framed glasses.

“This is what it says,” he told Timothy. “I translate for you.”

He scribbled for a moment, folded the paper, and handed it to Timothy. Then he loaded the fragment back into the box and slid it across the desk. “Now I have an appointment,” he said, pushing himself back from the desk.

“Is it real?” Timothy said.

The professor shrugged. “You need to ask an archaeologist. Someone who can test such things.”

He attended Mass at St. Peter’s, and, though he took the blood and body of his Savior, he was only a spectator, standing outside of ritual, maybe even time, he thought.

#

In London a Soho tattoo artist inked his forearms, using the fragment as a guideline.

“You know what this says, Mate?”

“I think I do,” Timothy said.

#

In and out of airports, in and out of hostels, in and out of subway stations—the London Underground, the Paris Metro.

The places he inhabited were abuzz with electric air, people pulsing in and out of tight places, airplane engines, pissed off locals.

He knew he was conspicuous. His haircut, his giant duffel, and his boots all said American.

Everything was inconvenient.

#

He went to Avila, Grenada, and walked the cliffs in Segovia.

Long he stood on the edge. “Cast yourself down,” he heard.

He was Gilgamesh, he thought, weeping for Enkidu’s death.

#

Ten months after leaving Iraq, money almost gone, Timothy found himself in Barcelona on Carrer de la Marina dining outside The Paella House.

He’d read of the splendour of the Sagrada Familia, and having spent so long in the country, felt it a necessary stop, the last one on his journey perhaps.

Tired of the endless security checks, flight attendants as world-weary as he, streets that wound through unfathomable cities, tired of lowering his pail into the abyss.

If home could not offer him answers, it could at least offer stillness, rest.

He had no expectations. Only obligation, a mark on a checklist.

So he ate chicken and rice as passer-by dodged his duffel, one strap looped under the leg of his chair.

He'd read the best place to see the building was from atop Ayre Hotel Rosellon, just around the corner. His plate cleared and Euros handed over, he wandered north to Carrer del Rossello, entered the hotel, and took the elevator to the 8th floor. He followed signs to the terrace—around a corner and up a flight of stairs and exited the building.

The building forced itself on Timothy, rising to meet him as soon as he stepped outside. It had not asked for his permission.

The earthen textures, the spires rising to penetrate the sky, it was too big to see. It wasn't a basilica, but a fortress, an empire, a universe of its own, and a black hole.

Was that the point, to erect a structure none could contain?

He'd visited many churches, had been swallowed several times over, reminded of his smallness. St. Paul's. Notre Dame. The Sacre-Coeur. St. Peter's. Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But this was altogether different.

His response was visceral, as if he'd taken a hill too quickly and bounded over the other side out of control, a Humvee somersaulting over a dune. The tumult he felt first in his gut, and it extended to the rest of his body quickly, as if whatever he felt pulsed through every channel, rushed into every recess.

No, it wasn't even a building. It was the crown of a hulking beast working its way up from Hell through the earth's surface. The pneumatic drills, the pounding, and the shouting across the way were not efforts to finish the project that Gaudi began over a century before, but to hold it down, to keep it from clawing its way out and crushing the world in its jaws.

He couldn't imagine walking inside. Did he want to tempt it, whatever it was?

He left the terrace nauseous, and threw up on Carrer de Provenca. He couldn't get far enough away.

He walked through the city, down to Old Town, trying to admire the architecture, the courtyards, the tourists filling up the place with idle conversation, wonder, and confusion, and the locals playing football in the alleways, the old women hanging clothes from the rails on balconies, the unfortunate of the city huddled over and vomiting in the streets just as he'd done earlier, but his mind was preoccupied. He knew that whatever Gaudi had shown him was true.

Night fell as he lay on a concrete bench outside the museum of contemporary art, using his duffel for a pillow. Spanish words rose and fell around him, not unlike places in

Palaver, though he was ashamed to admit he only knew one word, agua. His breathing was heavy, still trying to put himself back together.

If he left tomorrow for Palaver, what would await? Who had he become? What had he realized? Had he learned anything, “figured anything out,” as Ferrell had once put it?

Though his better instincts told him to find a hostel for the night, he didn’t heed them but lay supine, tumbling in and out of sleep, of dreams, or nightmares, until in the distance, a shadow cornered the museum, tallish and broad-shouldered. A streetlamp illuminated his approach. His hair was curly. He wore all green. Timothy stood upright and strapped on the bag. The man was too close.

“¡Hola!”

Timothy knew two Spanish words, in fact. But he sped up, hoping to lose the man.

“¡Americano!”

Okay, three, he thought, trying to calm himself.

The man might not have meant harm, just a friendly midnight chat.

Timothy turned to face him.

The man stopped a few feet shy. They were outside the circles of light cast by the streetlamps.

He spoke, but Timothy did not understand. He edged closer, his hands in the air.

“Ungido.”

“No hablo espanol,” Timothy said, losing count now.

“Ungido, Americano.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

Closer still, the man lifted his hand to his head and rubbed the top in circles.

Then a long string of Spanish. Timothy, from his journeys through the land of the mystics in Spain, recognized the word “Milagros.”

Miracles.

Timothy reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of Euros and held them out to the man. He slapped Timothy’s hand, sending the coins flying onto the cobblestone. Shaking his head and wagging his finger at him, he continued.

He pointed to the sky. He pointed to Timothy. But nothing was getting through. The man edged even closer and thrust himself upon Timothy, still speaking a long unbroken chain of Spanish, the refrain of every line Ungido. His embrace enveloped Timothy. He smelled of the street, of sleeping outside. They moved side to side, under a

streetlamp and back into darkness, until, exhausted by the slow dance, Timothy pushed him back.

“Gracias,” he said and walked on, leaving the man hollering behind until he was only a faint echo, calling out to him from the heart of the ancient city.

#

A dark-skinned Spaniard tended the check-in desk of a hostel Timothy found in the Gothic Quarter. In English she informed him there were plenty of rooms though he'd have to share.

“What does ungido mean?” he asked, before turning to go.

“Ungido?”

“Ungido.”

She cocked her head and laughed. “This is strange question,” she said and looked down at the paperwork in front of her, “Timothy.”

Timothy resituated his duffel, waiting.

“It means anointed. Church word.”

He nodded, pulled the straps on his bag again and headed to his room.

All he had were more questions, questions wrapping each other, tangling themselves in knots, ambiguous, and then falling limp, loose ends left dangling like the ropes of a street magician on Las Ramblas.

In his room, while the others slept in the dark, he took off his clothes and thought of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Alphonsus Liguori.

He put his sleeping bag on the bed, but before he crawled in, he stood up straight in the room and closed his eyes. He thought of the *Sagrada Familia*, the man in the street. He thought of Ferrell and the blast in the enclave.

Remembrance was the only prayer he had.

He was floating, rising above the floor by several feet, his head almost touching the ceiling.

When he came down, someone grunted and muttered in Spanish.

In the morning he wasn't sure it'd happened.

Everything in the last year was covered in the miasma of grief.

He wanted to believe but could not trust any account in his memory but the day of Ferrell's death.

The next morning when packing his clothes, he took out the box. Though it was cumbersome and heavy in his duffel, he'd kept it close.

He lifted the lid and took out the ostrakon and tried to think of a story, but it was as fragmented as the vase. He couldn't think of names, places, or even a plot. He couldn't muster the imaginative energy that Ferrell had. *Maybe Ferrell is the only one to give this meaning.*

So it is no surprise to him when, months later, the morning after his breakdown at Walgreens, Sherman pounds on his door, bedraggled and sweaty, and tells him that the ostrakon is a fucking fake and that the original is housed in Paris.

#

Sherman hadn't wanted to go to him. When the young minister opens the door and hears the news, he sees that Timothy hadn't wanted him to, either. He purses his lips and swings open the door, inviting him.

What I ever do to you? he thinks but says, "I figured you'd return the favor." He hesitates at first but Timothy nods, so he enters the apartment and sets the box down on his kitchen table.

"Jesus, kid. You need a bookcase." He walks to the blinds at the front of the apartment and looks out, then does the same at the back. "This place safe?" When he turns to look back at Timothy the boy looks at his feet. He shuts the door and fastens the chain lock.

"As any other in Palaver."

Sherman's hands quiver. "But it's not gated."

"What's going on?" Timothy says, lifting his head.

"I just walked five miles down here."

"In your suit?"

"It's a new thing. Listen, you're military, right?"

"Honorable discharge."

Sherman slaps his hands together. "We're yin and yang, then."

Timothy shakes his head. "I'm dealing with my own stuff right now."

"I know. Floating all over the fucking place."

"Can't you call the cops?"

"You had my class. Come on. History's not always as simple as that."

"Tell me what's going on," Timothy says, easing onto the metal chair against the wall.

Sherman tries to hold together, but his walking out into the night, seeing the floodlight illuminating the ferns on the porch and the small water pitcher with the

sunflower moulded into its side plays like a film reel in his mind the size of a Ferris wheel.

“You got guns?”

Timothy has closed his eyes. Sherman slides down the opposite wall and buries his face in his hands. *Who is this kid anyway?*

Sherman reaches out to him, and into darkness. “I’ve fucked everything.”

Timothy opens his eyes and clutches his knees. “Last night I was preaching to customers at Walgreens.”

“Any converts?” Sherman says, his head still in his hands.

“You’re not listening.”

Between his fingers Sherman spies Timothy glaring at his arms.

“They got Tracey.”

The kid mutters something and stands, retracing the steps Sherman took earlier, to the window at the front, then the back.

“What can I do about it?”

“We go in guns a blazing.”

“I don’t want to touch another gun.”

“No time to be Gandhi. This is everything you believe acted out.”

“I’m hardly a player in the drama, Professor, not anymore. I can’t even pray.”

“Goddamit, Timothy, call me Sherman. I’m a desperate man talking to another desperate man right now.”

#

Rayne pushes open the door of the music shop and winds her way to the counter where Chuck, perennial white goatee in full bloom, hangs audio cords on the wall.

“Finally caught, huh?” Chuck says and turns to her after he’s put the last of the cords up.

“When’s the last time you saw Cliff?”

He walks to the counter and leans over, obscuring his pear shaped body. “Jesus, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“He hasn’t worked at the shop in months. I had to let him go.”

“I just saw him yesterday. He said—”

“I’m sure he said a lot of shit. He snapped, Rayne.”

The door rings, and a boy and his mother ease into the shop.

“He’s gone. He’s been kidnapped or something. I don’t know.”

“Jesus Christ. I knew he was in some bad shit, but--”

“You know about it?”

“I know he was on speed or meth or something. He came in wanting to pawn his electric, all twitchy and shit. I went over to his house a few times to check on him, and he was out of it.”

Rayne’s looking into the glass case at student trumpets. Her palms rest on top, just next to a set of wire cutters.

“But that was months ago.” Chuck moves to the register and taps on the keys.

“You didn’t do him right.”

Atonal chords ring out through the room. The boy’s taken up a Les Paul for, apparently, the first time.

Rayne winces. “Can you get him to stop?”

“Bad for business.”

“I had a fucking miscarriage, Chuck.”

The clash of notes continues down the aisle behind.

“Rayne, I known you for a long time. You’re as hard as Georgia clay.”

Rayne grabs the wire cutters on the counter and walks through the aisles until she reaches the kid. She pulls the guitar from his hands and snaps off all six strings and hands it back. “Best way to learn to play.”

“Mom,” the kid shouts across the store.

Rayne marches back to the counter. “So you got nothing?”

“You should probably leave, detective,” he says and smirks. “And give me some dough for those strings.”

Rayne reaches into her pocket and places a ten on the counter.

“I’m sorry, Chuck.” She turns and yells into the aisle, “I’m sorry I broke the strings, kid. Grab another. There’s plenty.”

The strumming starts again.

Back to Chuck, “Know his dealer?”

“Never dug too deep. That’s a world I ain’t interested in knowing.”

“If you hear anything, see anything. Hell, if you have the slightest hunch, give me a call.”

#

She drives out to Sherman’s. She’s passed his driveway many times but has never seen his trailer. When she pulls up to the place, she isn’t surprised. The grass is

overgrown. His Prius sits out front, all four tires slashed. The front porch is a mess of ferns and flowers.

She opens the storm door and knocks. And again. No one stirs.

“Dammit, Sherman. Open the door.”

When she tries the handle, the door gives.

The inside is a mess, too. The morning sun comes in from the doorway behind. Shag carpet, a wretched recliner, duct taped at the seams. A shotgun on the floor. Drugs he’d meant to flush still in the toilet

She walks through, calling out. When it’s apparent Sherman isn’t around, she closes the door, knowing no good will come of bringing the cops into his drug den.

Afterwards, she goes to The Lofts and asks about Brian Stokes.

“He’s gone,” the boy at the door says. He’s the handsome one who’d gotten her the rum and coke. If he recognizes her, he doesn’t let on. “Haven’t seen him. Didn’t tell anyone where he was going.”

At a briefing at the station, she tells them of being tied up, seeing Cliff and the others on Vision. Marvin Randolph draws a sketch of the whistler, and they tack it onto the bulletin board and pass it around.

#

She hangs a cigarette out the passenger’s side window as Darrell drives the Explorer toward Nathan Warren’s apartment on Bennett Circle. Her hair’s pulled back again. She’s gripping the handle overhead, staring at the roadside.

“So nothing?” Darrell says.

“How can so many people just fucking vanish? And two of them aren’t just people. Not to me. You know?”

“Been at this a long time,” Darrell says, shaking his head, “but hardly seen action. Speeding tickets, parking citations, been traffic cop for the high school. I’m in a small city for a reason. Bout the riskiest thing I done was when we busted a couple of rednecks with a meth lab in the trunk of their Honda Civic. These guys we’re up against now, Rayne, what they did to you, to Cliff, and Sherman, sweet Jesus, they’re like ghosts or something. And you can’t shoot a ghost. His cell goes off, and he thumbs it, killing the ringer. “She won’t leave me alone,” he says. “Jasmine. It’s a mess. This time my Mama’s calling her to ask for money.”

“I don’t know why she doesn’t leave your dad.”

“Me neither. Everybody else did.”

Darrell takes the turns, following the route on the GPS, and Rayne burns through as many cigarettes as it takes to keep calm.

"I'm sorry I didn't answer last night. I was indisposed. I called the bar but you'd done gone."

"You wouldn't have gotten there in time anyway."

"I don't want to pry," he says and hums, fingers beating against the steering wheel. "We been at this a while together, but you said you were at the bar. And I know that day I came over you were drinking. Now, I've known you a while and..."

Her eyes are on the road as the small duplex, a series of squat vinyl siding houses appears on the right. "And?"

He hums. "Nothing, I guess."

She goes over the profile in her head: The Warren kid lives in 14B. Been on probation since January.

His car, a 900 series SAAB is out front. *Good.*

Darrell stubs his thousandth cigarette out in the ashtray and shuts off the engine. She throws hers out the window.

"You okay? Really, I mean," he says.

She swings open the door, gets out, hunches over from outside, and with one finger pushes up her cheek in a half smile.

He cuts the engine and nods. "I'll go around back."

The wind has picked up, howling through trees across the road. A satellite dish wobbles on the roof. A trashcan tumbles over, glass shattering against the sidewalk. Sunlight reflects in the windshields of the cars.

She knocks and grips her gun. No answer. Understandable. She knocks again. Nothing.

Into the handheld, "Anything back there, Darrell?"

"Negative."

She knocks again, this time louder, longer. "Palaver Police, Nathan. We need to ask a few questions."

"Rayne, get back here," Darrell says through the handheld.

Passing a line of browning azaleas on the sidewalk, almost running into a trash bin, she rounds the corner and finds Darrell halfway inside the apartment.

"Door's open. My God."

Beside him now, she peers into the apartment.

"The fuck?" Rayne says.

Dangling in mid-air by a rope pulled over the rafter is Nathan's body, swaying back and forth. Chin resting against chest, his eyes open. His hands and feet are severed from his body. Military boots beneath him. Blood drips into a puddle of blood below and flows out into tributaries on the linoleum.

She brushes by Darrell and into the apartment, drawing her gun.

Darrell comes in behind her. "Sweet Jesus."

"Body's still swaying, Darrell," she says, her gun trembling in front of her.

She points it toward the half darkness of the hallway. Darrell draws his between sweet Jesus's and they inch toward the shadows.

She reaches for the WalkieClip on her shoulder. "Homicide, 14B Bennett Circle. We need backup, an ambulance. Checking the place out now. We need someone to follow up with Aplin Tucker and Trevor Toombs, too."

"Police," she shouts into the hallway.

Except for an impressive collection of porn on DVD, a piano keyboard, Danzig posters, coke, meth, and used syringes, the place is empty.

Darrell hops over the streams of blood and out the back door to smoke.

Rayne checks the room where Nathan hangs. The twine of the rope creaks as it goes taut, loosens, and goes taut again. "Why the fuck is he still swinging? On the bar between the living room and kitchen, his severed hands clasp a piece of notebook paper. Without touching it, she reads its decorous script.

Dear Rayne,

No surprise you'd come here next. Order's what you looking for, isn't it? There ain't none, see? Who are you to ask who I am? Who are you to look for sense? Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make many supplications unto thee? will he speak soft words unto thee? Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant for ever? Wilt thou play with him as with a bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens? Shall the companions make a banquet of him? shall they part him among the merchants? Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish spears? Lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more. Behold, the hope of him is in vain: shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him? None is so fierce that dare stir him up: who then is able to stand before me?

Rayne steps around the blood on her way out and wipes her boots in the back yard while dialing the coroner.

Two crime scene investigators arrive, wrap the place in yellow tape, and get to work inside.

Darrell's still smoking, shaking his head, and whispering "Sweet Jesus."

Before she leaves, she'll go to the adjoining apartments, ask questions, get no answers, and say 'thank you, have a good one.'

Later, she'll look through evidence the crime scene investigators find—prints, maybe, shoe or boot or barefoot, and hear speculation about the murder weapon.

But right now she's talking to the coroner and looking past the backyard and its barrenness, all red clay with just a few patches of grass, up over the treeline to the top of the wire factory, blowing smoke from its towers. The duo of grey clouds trails upward and dissipates into the blue as voices on the radio confirm that both Trevor Toombs and Aplin Tucker have been hung from the ceiling, their hands and feet hewn off. At both sites the perpetrators have left notes addressed to her. No sign of Cliff or Sherman.

She snaps the phone shut and stuffs it in her pocket. She turns to Darrell and, for a moment, wishes she could pull him toward her, to feel another body, warm, animate, and breathing.

The siren of the ambulance surrounds them. EMT's scurry in and out of the house. The coroner, Bill Wilmington, close-cropped black hair, in a polo and jeans, shows up, nods to them and heads inside.

He's overdressed for this, Rayne thinks.

#

Over the hiss and crackle of Timothy's AM radio—he's probably the only kid in Palaver who doesn't own a TV, Sherman thinks—they listen to the news: three dead in Palaver, delivered with all the subtlety of local newscasters.

Sherman hears the subtext, "Stay the fuck inside."

But he can't.

He doesn't want to wait. All afternoon, he's tried calming himself. He wishes he had a hit of coke or a joint. He must quiet his mind. Timothy told him just that an hour before. "Quiet your mind, Professor." If there's any chance of saving her, they'll have to leave it 'til dark. Timothy's looking at satellite images of the place in Temple, Georgia, about three-hundred acres of land, a barn, a church, and a house set about fifty yards north of the church.

"I don't get it," Timothy says.

Timothy sits on the floor and taps on the keys of his laptop while Sherman hunches over the dining table, twirling the chamber of his Colt, making sure every hole is filled. He needs more guns. Timothy doesn't even own one. *What kind of Marine is he?*

"It's a church?" Timothy says.

"Yes."

"And they deal drugs?"

"It's not a proper church. That's not important."

"How did you fall in with these people?"

"Goddamn it, Timothy. We can't all be saints."

"You had a good job, though."

"Can you get any guns?" Sherman says.

"I'm not killing anyone."

"What about for intimidation?"

"Turn the other cheek."

"That's rich. The fuck you enlist for?"

"People change their minds."

"You shoot someone over there?"

"If you want my help, take it as it comes."

Sherman clicks the chamber into place and sets the gun on the table. "This is my shit, I know." He turns in the chair and faces Timothy in the living room. "Whatever you do, I'm thankful. You don't owe me anything."

Timothy purses his lips and nods.

Sherman means it, but he wants to move the world, wants the momentum of a locomotive. Wants to split it in two. But all he has is a fucking revolver.

Chapter 8

Once like a snake stretched straight for miles, parking lots and sidewalks holding it in place, the road now has room to bend and curl, move with the land, not in spite of it. The Chrysler dealer, Waffle House, Joe's Total Car Wash are faint glimmers, history, Sherman thinks, his elbow resting against the door, then by his side, and back to the door. He grips the Colt beside him, twirls the chamber, toys with the safety. On the back of the snake they wind, a ribbon of asphalt between walls of trees. Occasional bleeps from the dash warn that Sherman's not fastened his seatbelt.

Out-of-towners might think a place this far south of the streetlamped city uncharted. And for years it was. Nothing, not even a railroad, connected the place to the outside world until forty years before when they plowed a paved road through.

Only the headlights, an occasional floodlight above a mailbox, and glimpses of the moon through breaks in the canopy fall upon them. Wind rattles the truck and whistles through Timothy's cracked window.

He's got on the high beams. Sherman reaches for the radio. He twists the dial to outbursts of static between faint music. A gospel quartet. "Mr. Bojangles." An inane dance tune. A Prairie Home Companion. "Beast of Burden." He sighs and shuts it off.

Until recent years Temple was disputed territory, resting between Palaver and Harston county. The county offices bickered about several issues. *To whom do citizens pay real estate taxes? Where do kids go to school? In which precinct do they vote?* Folks just stopped arguing about it, not enough people living there to worry with it. The few who do send their kids to schools in either county and pay taxes to whatever entity they'd paid them before. Some folks don't even pay taxes in Temple.

"What's on your arms?" Sherman says. "What's it say?"

The steering wheel's in his hands, Timothy thinks. He can turn around, call the cops, get out before it consumes him. But his foot's down on the pedal, and he cannot say what compels him. He dreamed long of a civilian's life. War had taken his friend, maybe more. But the road goes now in only one direction.

"Nevermind," Timothy says, not looking over.

Sherman fidgets in the seat. "Whatever."

Headlights bear down straight on the tree wall as he eases the wheel to the right onto J Bar Road. Tires grate against gravel. He pulls right again, bounces into a thicket, and cuts the high beams while edging between trees.

Timothy flips on the interior, reaches for the glovebox, and grabs a flashlight.

Sherman clicks the chamber into place.

Skunk, road kill, and pine waft into the cracked windows. Sherman hops out and tucks the Colt into his pants.

Timothy kills the inside light and follows, nudging the door shut with a hip. They're just shy of two hundred yards from the church, though the darkness enveloping them suggests miles.

"You gonna turn it on?" Sherman says.

"Hand me your cellphone."

They edge into the thicket, Sherman swatting at spider webs, Timothy shining the phone onto a compass. The electrical drone of crickets surrounds them as they lift legs high, almost in a march, to avoid tripping over roots or getting caught in thorn bushes.

"Quietly," Timothy says.

The church backs up to the woods. Moonlight reveals the tin roof, the tip of two steeples, tower-like, at the front. A propane tank rests between the barn and church. A dim bulb above the barn door casts another circle of light onto the ground.

Waller's truck, 50s model Ford pickup, sits by the back door of the church. Light shines through a window in a back room of the church.

Sherman reaches for the Colt.

"Stay here," Timothy says, crouching and moving toward the truck.

"Where are you going? This wasn't a part of the plan."

"We had a plan?" He moves on, walking low, until he reaches the truck. He shines Sherman's cell into the cab, illuminating an axe and handgun. Moving alongside it, he rises and shines the light onto a lump, a black trash bag, in the bed.

Two muffled voices, a man murmuring and laughing, and another, talking slow, reach him. He inches around the tailgate, still crouched.

"The fuck you doing?" Sherman whispers across the way.

He can see straight inside. One man, covered in blood, shirtless, the front of his overalls hanging over his torso and crotch, washes at a basin. The side of the other man's head is scorched, only the remnants of an ear on the right side. He wears a dirty tee and jeans. He sits in a chair, holding a snake, at first above his head, then down to his chest, then out in front, while the other stands and scrubs his arms over the sink. The snake curls around the old man's arm. He sees a line of .30 M1's against the far wall. The man at the basin towels himself and swings his arms under the overalls, pushing his arms through the loops. He's whistling a tune.

Timothy rounds the truck, retracing his steps.

"Just two," Timothy says.

“I told you that.”

“One could be pushed over. We go in and tie them up.”

A door squeaks open in front of them. They fall onto their stomachs.

The man in overalls carries a shovel. He stops at the truck and looks in their direction, then over toward the barn, then back at the church. It’s “The Old Rugged Cross” he’s whistling, Timothy hears now.

He leans over and hefts the bag over his shoulder and, one hand cradling the bag and the other holding the shovel, he walks around the side of the church and into the field. His silhouette grows smaller in the light of the hook lamp.

“You don’t think...” Sherman says.

“Don’t think. Shoot him.”

“What?”

“His back is turned.”

Sherman’s gripping the gun. He could rise, walk toward him, and fire, downing him in an instant. Waller will fall, he thinks, an oak struck by lightning.

He stands and tiptoes toward the shadow and lifts the gun. He must get closer, he thinks.

His hand trembles. He takes several steps, almost coming into the circumference of the light from the barn light but backs away, crouching again, returning to Timothy.

“I can’t,” he whispers.

Someone moans from the barn, meeting the buzz of crickets and the distant sound of Waller shovelling.

“This way,” Timothy says, moving toward the barn.

Sherman follows. He’s not thinking. It’s impossible. There’s only movement now.

The barn between them and Waller, the one long, muffled moan continues. Timothy’s back against the wall, he edges along until he rounds the corner. There’s no light in the back. He lifts a hand and feels for the door. The latch meets his hand, but the door is barred. Sherman rises and removes a 2X4 and sets it on the ground. He pulls it open. Timothy stands behind Sherman now. Timothy’s hand squeezes Sherman’s shoulder as he inches in first.

The Colt leads the way. Timothy keeps an eye behind them. Once Sherman’s inside, Timothy follows, easing the door shut and clicking on the flashlight.

The flashlight jitters around the room, scaling the wooden planks of the walls, up to the hay loft, and down again. Timothy’s familiar with the stench, body odour,

excrement, and urine. He's smelled it before on a rescue op. A dozen men holed up, living in a warehouse for days. There's a soiled mattress directly in front of them.

Sherman almost trips but steadies himself, moving around it, and finding footing on the dirt floor.

"Along the walls," Timothy says.

Timothy settles his hand and moves the light to the left side. A line of people rest with their backs against the barn wall. A couple of them are tied. The rest appear free, their hands cupped on their laps or resting at their sides. Their eyes are open, all but one of them, but they give no indication they're bothered by the intruders. The moaning continues.

"Tracey?" Sherman whispers. He walks the length of the wall, crouching, whispering her name. Timothy follows behind, his light illuminating each face. "More of 'em."

"What do you think they're doing?"

"No idea."

They're at the front of the barn now, at the cow stalls, and the light rests on a man's face, the source of the moaning. He's wearing a leather jacket, leaning back against a pile of hay. Strings of black hair are matted to his face. His mouth is agape, the flashlight revealing the inside of his mouth. Timothy can't look away.

"Tracey?" Sherman calls, turning to the other side.

"Who are you?" the man says. "You here to give Vision?"

Timothy grips the flashlight tight, his hand shaking the beam over the man's face. Sherman returns, still crouching.

"Quiet," he says. "We're here to help—Holy shit, it's Cliff."

"Who's Cliff?"

"Rayne's Cliff."

"Hammondtree?"

"The pill?" Cliff says.

"What?" Sherman says.

"Said he wants Vision," Timothy says.

Cliff wrestles himself to his knees and clambers closer, gripping the metal bar at the center of the stall door. The other hand he uses to balance himself.

Timothy keeps the light on his face and reaches toward him, placing a hand next to Cliff's on the metal bar. "We have to help. All of them."

Sherman's breathing quick, forced, "No time."

Timothy's jerked toward the stable door, the side of his head knocked against metal. Timothy pulls back, gains traction, but Cliff pulls again. He's growling as he pulls. His grip is too tight. Timothy's dropped the flashlight.

Sherman hops over the stall door and falls into the pen.

Once on his knees, he pulls at Cliff, but Cliff's lodged in place, as if his body has grown out of the floor.

Sherman lifts the gun above and throws it down on Cliff's head. Timothy falls back on his elbows, and Cliff falls forward, his head bashing the stall gate, a metallic ring filling the barn.

"Rayne knows how to pick 'em, huh?" Sherman says.

A door slams outside.

Sherman hops over the stall and, once balanced, holds the Colt up again.

"Quick," he says.

Timothy grabs the flashlight.

"Vision?" another voice says.

"The other side," Sherman says.

They double back and inspect the other stalls, but they're empty. Back in the open space of the barn, they walk along the opposite wall.

Tracey sits between two more kids. Her feet and hands are bound. She's dressed for bed, short, pink cotton shorts and a Hello Kitty tee shirt.

"Tracey," Sherman says.

She's staring past them.

"I need another one?" she mutters.

"No you don't," Sherman says.

Timothy puts the end of the light in his mouth. He pulls a Swiss Army from his pocket and scuttles to her. He cuts through the rope while Sherman turns and points the gun into the darkness.

"You getting me out of here?" she says. "Sherman?"

"Hurry, kid."

"Vision?" say other voices from around the barn.

Feet shuffle.

"They're moving, Sherman."

"I need another," Tracey hisses.

Timothy hoists Tracey up and carries her bridegroom style, a beam of light shining from under her knees. He can't believe how light she is.

Timothy kicks open the back door.

Sherman pushes away the kids who've gathered around. The door by the stables swings open, and Sherman elbows through the kids, stumbles, and makes it out the back.

Timothy carries Tracey ahead, thorns pulling at them, holding them back. Tracey's kicking.

"Almost there," he says.

His arm is wet.

A gun fires from behind Sherman. Darting toward the tree line, he's sucking in air. He jumps the propane tank and rolls off the other side. Back on his feet, he's almost to the darkness of the wood when another shot fires and pierces his calf.

He falls into brambles and topples over onto his back.

A shadow approaches, taking slow, measured steps. It has all the time it needs. It doesn't give a shit.

Sherman's lost his breath—and his gun.

From under the hook lamp one of the kids emerges, then another, until a group of them congregate outside, as if they're popping out of the barn with each step Waller takes. One darts off into the darkness, and the others moan after him. Their bodies contort. One reaches its hands into the air and cries out.

Waller turns to the barn, then back to Sherman, then back to the barn. He spins around and hustles to the circle of light.

Timothy hovers over.

"About time," Sherman says.

"Can you stand?"

Timothy lifts him, and Sherman uses his good leg to balance himself. "Not by myself."

They lumber through the thicket. Behind them, sounds of Waller's struggle to herd the kids fade.

Sherman has given up walking. Timothy lifts him as he lifted Tracey and carries him the rest of the way. Out of the worst of the brush, Sherman's lost his breath.

"Through your nose," Timothy says.

With a hand under Sherman's knee, he opens the door and sets him next to Tracey.

"My gun," Sherman says.

"Got it."

An engine turns, revs, and scatters gravel.

They know it's Waller in the distance.

Timothy jumps in and cranks the Ranger, reverses, and jerks the truck around to J Bar Road, a cloud of dust rising in the taillights.

As they wind down the back road, two beads appear in the rearview, disappearing at intervals, but at every reappearance swelling.

The Ranger howls at Timothy's prodding. Someone's startled the snake, the curves harder to take. At every straightaway the lights are larger behind them.

Then they're close enough to illuminate the cab.

Sherman's breathing through his nose and groaning.

Tracey's mumbling, "I need another" between them.

"You're going to have to shoot," Timothy says, handing the gun to him over Tracey's lap. "Now."

The road lengthens.

Sherman turns in his seat and pokes the Colt through the cab window.

Waller tailgates them, then bumps them.

"Steady," Timothy says. "You ever used a gun?"

"That was Tracey's job."

She leans over and turns on the radio, the static filling up the cab.

"Move your head, Tracey."

Tracey leans over, her head on Timothy.

He's taking the road too fast. The Ranger hits the shoulder of the road and bounces. Waller's truck barks at them.

Sherman fires. Glass shatters. Tires shriek. Headlights jerk to the side.

The sound doesn't faze Tracey. She stares at the road ahead.

Timothy's hands quake.

"My fucking leg," Sherman groans.

They're in the clear, the road empty and silent except for the hum of the engine.

Timothy hangs a left on Hog Liver Road, lights piercing the darkness. No streetlamps, just the endless night, kudzu vines covering the shoulders of the road, reaching into the woods, up the shadowy lengths of trees.

Before long nature gives way to concrete and parking lots and street lamps. Back by the Waffle House, the Chrysler dealer. Then a Kroger. A McDonald's. A Burger King. They pass the library, drive through the square, make their way to South Street and Highway 27 and turn into Timothy's complex.

Sherman reaches over, grunting, as they park, shutting off the radio static. The cold of the late-October night has set in. Neither has noticed until now.

Timothy rests his head against the wheel and turns to the side.

Tracey returns the gaze, half-smiling, the moonlight shining through the windshield onto her face. "I need another one."

"The fuck?" Sherman says.

"I need one," Tracey whispers.

Timothy leans back from the wheel. "One what?"

"We had so many, Sherman."

"Jesus Christ," Sherman says.

She rams her face into the dashboard. She looks up, laughs, and rams it again.

Timothy leans over and grabs her arms.

Sherman rubs her head, front and back, trying to console her.

Her hands clench. Blood streams down her forehead.

"Stop it," Sherman says.

Her voice breaks. She weeps now.

"Here," Sherman says, reaching into his coat pocket. He fingers the pill into her mouth.

They're both holding her still, squirming along with her. Sherman's got his hand over her mouth. Timothy's chasing her arms around the cab as she tries to break free. They struggle for only a minute and her protests give way to calm. She eases back, her hands falling to her sides, her jaw slackening.

"Jesus, kid," Sherman says. "I'm fucking shot."

Chapter 9

Timothy swings open the door and circles to the passenger's side. He opens the door and crouches, and Sherman throws an arm over his shoulder. Timothy stands upright and Sherman hobbles out and up over the sidewalk. They stumble, Sherman's shoes scraping the brick porch. With his left hand, Timothy swings open the door and helps him cross the threshold. In the foyer Sherman grimaces, rests against the mailbox cubbies and perches his foot with the bum leg on the first step.

"Is she going to be okay?" Timothy says.

"I don't know what's in that shit."

"Can't keep giving it to her, then. How many more you got?"

"Just one."

Timothy sits on the third step up and slices Sherman's pant leg with his Swiss Army.

"An entrance and exit wound."

"Good?"

"The fact that you can walk at all suggests it didn't hit bone. I'll get it cleaned. Then you'll need antibiotics."

"No doctors."

Timothy takes off his shirt and ties it around the calf. "You're not making this easy."

"All for naught if someone finds out." He thumbs to the first-floor apartment door. "Let's break into this one, huh?" Sherman wraps an arm around Timothy as he stands. They mount the steps, each one higher, requiring more effort.

"The seniors get the first floors," Timothy says.

Sherman rests again halfway up the flight. "How 'bout you float us up the rest of the way?"

Timothy half sits on the handrail running up the opposite wall. "What's next?"

Sherman's huffing, head on the wall, leg out in front. One dim light shines above them. "The stairs."

Timothy thinks only of going back. Twenty miles or thousands, it's all the same. No longer anywhere in particular, the handrail, the staircase, just the hard surfaces upon which he finds himself in space.

"Then, I guess," Sherman says, turning, ready to climb, "we rest and get the hell out of here."

Up the stairs, and through the door, Timothy locks the deadbolt behind. He helps Sherman into the bedroom and eases him onto the bed.

“You think they know where to look?”

“I doubt it.”

“What about your tag?”

Timothy pulls leaves from Sherman’s hair. “You can’t look that stuff up.”

“Not legally.”

He grabs a stack of Bible commentaries and places them under Sherman’s thigh and foot. “We need to keep it up.”

“You’re not going to piss on me, are you?”

From the dresser Timothy lifts another shirt and pulls it over. “What?”

“That’s a thing, isn’t it?”

“I have water.”

Back at the truck, Timothy fumbles to pull Tracey out, kicking the door shut behind, and carrying her as before. Eyes open, head back over his arm, she’s dead, he thinks. His neighbor, Martha Grant, cracks open the door as he opens the foyer entrance.

Only half a face appears. “What’s the noise?”

Timothy looks down at Tracey, who’s staring upside down at Ms. Grant.

“Having some friends over. This one had a bit much to drink.”

She shakes her head and eases the door shut, lock sliding into place as he climbs the stairs and backs into the apartment. He’s glad she hadn’t noticed the blood on her welcome mat.

Nudging a pile of books with a foot he clears a space in the middle of the living room. He kneels and sets her down.

In the bathroom he bunches a towel into a ball and returns to place it under her head. Her shirt’s hiked to just under her breasts. He pulls it over her stomach and closes her eyelids.

“I’m thirsty, buddy,” Sherman says from the other room.

Timothy grabs two bottles of water from the fridge and a bandage wrap from under the bathroom sink. One bottle he hands to Sherman. The other he punctures at the top with the corkscrew on his knife. Sherman takes a few sips until Timothy instructs him to turn over. Without protest he flips, and Timothy moves to the other side. He unwraps the wound, places his shirt under it, and squirts water onto the two holes in his calf.

“You know what you’re doing?”

“Hope so.”

He circles the bandage round and plops down into a corduroy armchair. “You need as much water as possible.”

“What about antibiotics? Got anything here?”

“Not here.”

#

The town is paved with silence, only the hum of the Ranger beneath him. It’s nearing 3:30. He imagines her in bed, sheets bundled between her legs, one arm out and one behind her head. Her hair’s tossed over the pillow. She sleeps without expectation. Just the night before she’d consoled him in the parking lot and had taken him back to her apartment where she refused to let him touch her but reheated pot roast she’d had the night before.

They discussed plans to see a therapist. There was one in town, Ron Bailey, who’d been good for her when Timothy left. He wasn’t preachy, she said, though Timothy didn’t mind that. What she wanted most was for him to figure out how to live.

“It’s like you’re a different person,” she said, the dinner plates full of the leftovers. “You’ve always been torn, Timothy. It’s the same, but to a different degree now.”

She hovered over the carrots, then beef, then potatoes, circling the plate.

Timothy sat across from her in the opposite high top chair, doing much the same. “So I can see this guy, Rob—”

“Ron.”

“What will it do?”

“Talk through.”

“I can talk to you.”

“That’s never been enough,” she says, finally lifting a potato to her mouth.

“Missing someone is different,” he says.

She waits until the food is down. “It’s not like lovelorn folks is his specialty. Your job and his aren’t that different. I’m surprised you don’t understand.”

“I don’t have a job.”

“A lot of people loved you.”

“But I crossed a line.”

She stands and grabs a pitcher from the counter and brings it to the table. “You think you can’t come back?”

The words echo in his mind now as he takes the sharp right, the left, and another right that leads to her apartment. Maybe what he's learned is that he can't, that it's impossible. If she knew what he'd seen, she'd understand.

He doesn't want to implicate her. This story is not hers. She's an innocent, he thinks, but there are few options. His Ranger parked beside her car, he tries praying again, lifting up words, hoping that for whatever he's yearning can be articulated. Nothing arises but a gaping yawn sucking in the cabin air. He smells blood and gunpowder.

A well-rehearsed scene: he knocks and she pulls the door open halfway, a line drawn, defended.

"Timothy it's the middle of the night."

"I need something."

Her head falls. "I told you I can't."

"Just to talk."

Her eyes meet his, and her mouth curls. "That's why you need a therapist, Timothy." Unlatching the chain and stepping back, "Come in."

"Would Bailey let me in this late?"

Timothy enters in the half light cast by a small lamp on the end table--the room's more a cell now than it was upon his return--and sits on the sofa, elbows on his knees, fingers clasped in a series of x's.

Dishes clink and the electric kettle whines as Timothy surveys the room. On the end table, atop a thick family Bible, rest Susannah's keys. Beside the Bible the picture of all of them at the Little Nee Nee for a baptism. Ages ago. He reaches for the keys, grips tight, and stuffs them in his pocket.

She returns, sets down a mug on the coffee table, and sits in the chair across the room.

She tucks her robe around and lifts her mug. "Tell me about it, whatever it is now."

"He won't understand."

"Do I?"

"I think you're closer."

Her dimples appear as she bites the insides of her cheeks, almost a smile. "You hear about those kids?"

Timothy leans back now. "On the radio."

"Chief Richardson was talking about it on the television, said the GBI's involved now. FBI's who they need." She takes another drink, places the mug on a table beside

her, opens the table drawer, and pulls out something from inside. She stands and walks across the room and holds out her hand. "Here's his card."

Timothy takes it between two fingers and curls his hand to read the print.

She walks back to the chair, tucking her robe around.

She's tilting her head as Timothy inspects the card, then her. He can't make out her expression, only knows that in her silence she explores, too. Every word another tendril wrapping around whatever grows between them.

"I have to make things right," he says.

She nods and picks up the mug again. "Won't be easy."

"Maybe harder than you think."

#

Teleological suspension of the ethical, he thinks, slipping on gloves and a ski mask in the thicket behind the Jameson Inn, the red sign of Walgreens glowing above the asphalt. He walks the ridge, surveying the parking lot. The streetlamps buzz. The asphalt's broken in places, like a system of roadways on a map. It will be four or five hours before the place stirs, Susannah usually the first to arrive.

He comes not to speak now, he thinks.

Making his way down, he thinks of the photograph on Susannah's end table, another artefact, a different time and place, some might say, but not him.

Silas had advised they wait until summer or do the baptism within the church but others insisted on the river. A rich blue covered them, the deep of spring. It'd been a wet one and the river rose, roared through. A boy, no more than seven, had given his life to Christ, what life he could offer anyway, Timothy thinks now. He was tiny and the white robe he wore swallowed him. Timothy had waded out before him as the church members threw blankets on the banks and sang hymns. Donny walked from the bank into the water holding the boy's hand. Damian. Longish hair for a young boy, curls matted to his head as he edged through the current. Damian stepped on the rocks and grew taller for a second and then dipped back into the water. It wasn't deep, maybe only three feet, but it came up to his chest. Donny held Damian's arms until Timothy reached out and brought him close.

New life, commitment, a handing over, Timothy said to the crowd on the banks, though the rushing water drowned him out. "Buried in the likeness of his death," Timothy said, placing one hand behind Damian's back and another on his chest to lower him under. He disappeared in the river. Timothy felt his body jerk beneath and could see through the surface, eyes open. His hands gripped Timothy's wrist. "And raised in the likeness of his resurrection."

Damian came up snorting and coughing from the water that'd gotten in his nose, but he smiled once he cleared up. The people on the banks cheered and hollered "amen." They sang "Shall We Gather at the River."

But on the way back, Donny got caught on a limb, or a rock—he wasn't sure—and he toppled over, letting go of Damian's hand. Timothy had stayed behind to have prayer, and Donny had fallen before Timothy'd opened his eyes. When he heard the boy cry out, he opened his eyes, and the boy flailed his arms about, already swept downstream. People stirred on the banks. They'd come close and peered out at them. Sal jumped in and pulled Donny from the water. Timothy dove for the boy, throwing his arms into deep strokes, riding with the current. Damian was next to the bank downriver, holding to a fallen tree. He shivered when Timothy brought him close and climbed up with him.

It seems as if all of his memories, and maybe all of Susannah's--if she were honest--wage a battle between sentimentality and horror.

He follows the ridge until it meets a floodwall leading up to it from the store, roughly five feet from the ground. He jumps and lands on the asphalt. Behind the store are two Dumpsters in a cement alcove, one street lamp, and a thoroughfare for the drive-thru. A camera above the backdoor is a ruse, he knows. Taking out the keys proves difficult with his gloves. He removes one, picks through the keys, and, when the right one turns the lock, he returns glove to hand, keys to pocket, and enters.

Behind him he locks the door and inches through the hallway, only the red light of the exit sign to guide. He eases around a corner, bangs his hip against the water fountain, and steps onto the platform and into the pharmacy. His flashlight's on now. He walks the two narrow aisles, shining light onto the labels until he finds what he needs. He takes a handful of Cephalixin and some painkillers and drops them in his shirt pocket.

It had been Susannah's dream once to be back here, not at the front of the store.

He hadn't noticed it upon entering, but a small electronic beep, a cricket chirp, sounds from the other side of the store. He steps down from the platform and crosses, following the noise until he's at the alarm against the wall, prompting him for the passcode. They'd didn't have one before he left, he thinks.

The phone rings, and he's stumbling backward, tripping over his feet, bracing himself against an aisle, knocking items off shelves, and falling. Up and darting between the aisles now, sirens sound. He hits his hip on the water fountain. Blue lights illuminate the store as he scurries to the exit. Out back, he shuts the door and kicks it, breaking off

the handle. He's up the hill now and into the thicket, crossing the ridge behind the Jameson.

#

He unlocks her door, turning the key in noiseless counter-clockwise nudges. He pushes it until the chain at the top goes taut. He sticks an arm through the opening until it reaches above the Bible.

#

It's almost over, he thinks, opening the foyer door again. Ms. Grant meets him again, this time standing full bodied in the doorway.

"I told you I was going to call the cops if you didn't stop that racket."

"What do you mean?"

"I just got woken up again."

From above, a muffled thud. And another. "I'll go check on them. I'm really sorry, Ms. Grant. I thought they were asleep."

His foot's covering the blood spot on her mat. She slams the door and he crouches, picks up the mat, and hurries up the stairs.

Tracey stands in the center of the room, books in both hands.

"Timothy, is that you?" Sherman says from the bedroom.

"We gotta keep it down, Sherman."

"I can't be anywhere but down."

"What's going on?"

"Tracey just tried to bludgeon me to death with your Bible Concordance. Shit's thick."

Tracey hefts one of the books behind her, about to throw. Timothy's hands are out in front, the mat now on the floor. He shakes his head. "Put it down. I want to help."

"I need another," she says.

"Give her another," Sherman says.

She throws a book, thankfully a paperback--Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*—and Timothy catches it and sets it in the metal chair, grabbing her arm and spinning her into a hug from behind.

She hisses. "One more."

"You can't."

"You'll die," she sneers.

He pushes her into the kitchen, pulls the other book from her hand, and sets it on the table. She cries out, and Timothy throws a hand over her mouth. Her teeth sink into his index finger and he pulls back and wrestles her to the ground.

“Quiet.”

From under the sink he grabs rope and ties her arms behind her back, then her legs together. He gags her by stuffing a dish towel in her mouth and tying more rope around, then knots another piece of rope from her back to the piping under the sink. She wriggles on the floor. Her eyes peer at him.

“Only until you’re better.”

Her crotch is soaked through, a puddle of piss on the kitchen floor. Two tears stream out, then two more, and she’s shaking her head.

Timothy’s in knots. He sits at the kitchen table, Sherman’s gun and Ferrell’s box before him. He clasps his hands around the box, studies the hands on the top, the snake curling around. He opens it and lifts the fragment. No way to still himself by bringing Ferrell back in his mind, he turns here. He hasn’t heard Ferrell’s voice in hours? Days? He hopes an echo will escape, maybe a story. At least now it’s immaterial. The silence is irrelevant. Whatever discovery Ferrell—or his father—thought he’d made, and however that might have released Timothy doesn’t matter.

“The hell’s going on?” Sherman says.

“Just a minute,” he says, placing the piece back into the box. He doesn’t want to turn and see Tracey. Prisoners, he thinks. He stands and steps over her to grab a glass from the cabinet. He empties the pills into the glass, steps back over Tracey, who’s still fuming, and walks to the bedroom.

“I had to tie her up,” he says. “Neighbor’s going to call the police.”

Sherman’s hair’s matted over his head. “Go kill your neighbor.”

“Right.” Timothy sits on the edge of the bed. “Here.” He hands Sherman the bottle of water and a pill.

“How?”

“Don’t want to know.”

Sherman takes the pill, then the water, winces, and hands the bottle back to Timothy. His elbows pushing himself up, he’s against the headboard now. He nods at Timothy. “Why don’t you get some sleep, magic boy?”

Timothy returns the nod, rises, and walks into the kitchen. He cleans the puddle around Tracey and undoes the rope to pull off her shorts and panties and cleans her. Tracey’s gratitude meets him, a foot to his face. He clutches her ankles, rises and grabs a

pair of jeans from the bedroom. Once back, he slides them over her legs. Too big. After tying her legs again, he covers her in a wool blanket. She breathes fire through her nose. He lies down beside her and reaches an arm across her body. His hand pushes her fringe to the side. "Sleep now," he whispers.

Chapter 10

In the interrogation room Brittany Flowers wipes her nose on her sleeve and shakes her head, her dark curls quivering.

“This one?” Rayne says, sliding another picture before her.

She shakes again and pushes herself away from the table. “You’re the one. That night.”

Brittany’s nails are bright red. Mascara runs down her cheeks.

“I need your help. What about him?” Rayne pushes the image of Nathan’s body in front of Brittany.

She’s catching her breath, looking around the room. “Am I in trouble?”

“Were you dealing?”

“No.”

“Did you kidnap anyone?”

“No.” Her voice breaks.

“Then no. Your boyfriend is gone, along with several others. Three kids have been institutionalized. Three murdered. My fucking ex-fiancé’s gone. We’re looking for answers.”

She scrapes the chair back to the table, her head falling. “That’s him.”

Rayne’s standing but leaning over the table, palms on the surface, a stack of files under one hand. “How long had he been coming around?”

“Not long, a few days.”

“And you have no idea who he is?”

“Never knew his name. I should’ve called the cops, I know. Brian had been like that, all out of his mind, for a couple days.”

Rayne pulls the sketch of The Whistler down from the wall. “What about him?”

Brittany shakes again. “Will you find him?”

Brian’s parents, along with a host of others, some local, some from out-of-town, hover around the police station, coming in every hour, demanding news.

They want to blame the cops, anyone.

#

“Do you think Palaver’s got the resources?” someone asked at the press conference the night before.

Rayne stood off to the side as Chief Richardson fielded the questions. Chief had enlisted the G.B.I., but things had quieted since the night before. No other hangers, thank God, just names on an APB list.

“Sex trafficking?” someone suggested.

He reiterated the fact that, as of now, the disappearances seemed related to drug operations.

“And why is this the first we’re hearing of it?”

“It’s news to us as well.”

“And there were no prints at the murder scene?”

“I can’t say anything further at the time.”

Lights from cameras flashed as he walked off the platform.

“Godammit, Rayne,” Chief said as they walked the length of the hallway, his face as red as his beard. “Isn’t it your fucking job to find something? This ain’t *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?*”

Rayne stops short as he disappears around the corner.

Darrell waited for her in the office. “Don’t let him get to you,” he said as she sat down beside him, taking the cigarette he offered and lighting it. “He’s the face of this place, and if people can’t get answers, they’re gonna blame the face.”

“We’re in over our heads.”

“We keep at it.”

Rayne knocked ash into the trashcan beside her. “I want to get a search warrant for every goddamn place in Palaver.”

#

“You can go,” Rayne says to Brittany, who’s wiping her eyes as she stands. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry about the other night,” she whimpers.

“I’d have done the same thing at your age.”

Brittany leaves, sniffing and shaking her head. Rayne goes to the lounge.

As she grabs the coffee pot Japheth enters and leans against the counter beside her. Hands in his pockets, head rocking back and forth, he’s feigning thoughtfulness, Rayne thinks. She puts a cheese Danish on a plate and turns with her back to the counter as well.

“Seems like a tough one.”

“I got it, Japheth,” she says with her mouth full of the Danish.

“I had a look at those scriptures. Want to hear what I think?”

“mm mm,” she says, shaking her head.

“We’re not so different, you know.”

She takes a swig of coffee and swallows. “That so?”

“We’re two of the only folks here with a bachelor’s.”

“That’s got nothing to do with anything.”

Rayne drops her paper plate into the trash and Japheth clears his throat, then dives in the trash to pull it out and move it to the recycling bin. She sighs, pushes open the door of the lounge, and heads back to her office, him following behind.

“It’s a religious cult,” he says, walking abreast of her. “There’s more than one doing this. There’s got to be at least thirty to pull this off, the skill, the precision. I mean, these were perfect murder scenes.”

“Your admiration doesn’t crack the case.”

“Come on, Rayne. Let me help you with this. Maybe you have too much of a personal stake in it, you know?”

She pushes open her office door, leaving Japheth to clean his glasses in the hallway.

Charles Franklin, lead investigator from the G.B.I., stands in the center of the room.

Rayne nods.

“Get anything from the Flowers girl?”

“Nathan was Brian’s dealer.”

“That all?” He sits down in one of the metal chairs against the wall.

Rayne sits behind the desk and nods again.

“Dammit.”

His head’s too narrow for his shoulders, but his forehead rises like a sandwich board from the bridge of his nose, and a thick moustache rests under his nose, a funhouse reflection of Tom Selleck. “I’m reaching, but I think we should talk to a Bible scholar or a preacher or something.”

“Don’t think that will lead anywhere.”

“What else you got?”

She sips the coffee. “Nothing, but I looked up all those verses. What else do we need to know?”

“Maybe there’s a secret code, or maybe someone can tell us if this leads anywhere else.”

“Too much *C.S.I.*, Franklin.”

“Your chief wants our help, but you have no leads, no fingerprints, nothing. What am I supposed to do?”

Rayne lights a cigarette. “We need people undercover. Right now.”

“It’ll take time. All we got are the letters.”

She exhales a ball of smoke and shakes her head, resigned.

#

The evening before, Rayne had tried to move her parents into the Jameson. It was too dangerous to be out here alone, she’d told them. But even if staying meant someone—or No One—coming in and killing them, they refused. Mary Jo followed the refusal with a prayer asking for a hedge of protection around the Hammondtree place. So Rayne had taken her things to the old house and slept as much as possible, one eye on the window.

Mary Jo’s where she was when Rayne had left her that morning, on the sofa, the big black King James on her lap covering most of the thighs of her red sweat pants.

“It’s just too much, honey,” she says as Rayne enters and kicks her boots against the welcome mat.

Rayne sits beside her, the wooden floor creaking beneath. “I know.”

They know the news, and Rayne doesn’t want to add to their paranoia.

Her hands grip the sides of the Bible. She’s holding on, Rayne thinks.

“All of it. Cliff, Sherman, and Raymond, too. I know Raymond better than anyone. I know the insides, too.” Mary Jo opens the Bible and flips the thin pages.

“There’s a verse I found the other day:

‘When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.’”

She hands the Bible to Rayne. “I reckon I been through both the river and the fire. Read the rest of that.”

Rayne shuts the Bible and sets it on the coffee table. “I will later. Where’s Dad?”

“He’s resting some. Got really tired this afternoon. Think worrying ‘bout you out there in this mess is making it worse, sure is for me.”

“I’m not alone, Mama.”

“Cliff. Always was a lost soul. My dear girl,” she says and puts a hand on Rayne’s knee. “Go say hi to your daddy. I’m going to finish dinner.”

With help from Rayne, Mary Jo hefts herself up from the sofa and turns down the hallway, one hand balancing herself as she hunches over. Rayne follows behind and steps into the bathroom, where she pulls out the flask and sips. In the mirror she notices the circles, the lines, the eyes. She’d forgotten makeup that morning. Fuck it, she thinks.

Her father lies in the bed, his back against the headboard, holding a glass of sweet tea. He's lost weight since she ate with them a few days ago. The flannel shirt too big for his shoulders and arms.

"How you feeling?"

"I'm still going at it," he rasps and coughs into a handkerchief.

"Dinner's smelling good, isn't it?"

"Oh, I can't smell a lick."

Her boots rap the ancient floor as she moves across the room. In a rocking chair beside the bed she lowers herself.

He reaches out for her hand. Rayne offers.

"How are you holding up?"

"I don't know, Dad."

"The willow was singing the other night."

"What was it singing?"

He balls up the handkerchief and places his hand on his chest. "Moon River." You know that one?"

"That's a good one."

He nods, his eyes still on his hands at his chest.

"Sure it wasn't Sinatra?"

He laughs. "Might've been, might've been. Your mama's been playing the old records."

Standing and bending over, she hugs him and grabs the other hand. "Let's get some dinner."

#

"The lead investigator thinks I should get someone to look at the scripture in the notes," she says after Raymond has blessed the food.

"I just can't believe it," Mary Jo says, dropping peas onto her plate.

"Never seen the like," Raymond wheezes.

"Too bad Timothy was fired," Mary Jo says.

"Preachers are a dime a dozen around here," Rayne says. "I also thought about a Professor at the university."

"I know someone who's both, or was, 'bout the smartest man I ever met," Raymond says. "Reverend Tribes. Pastors a Holiness church, his daddy's. Place was shut down for several years, but I hear he's back at it, though I don't know anyone who goes out there anymore."

“I think Beulah and Pattie was out there a few years ago,” Mary Jo says.

“Was a religion professor at Palaver,” Raymond continues. “His daddy could preach The Word like nothin’ I’d heard. I used to sit by Jack in church. He’d memorized the whole book of Hebrews. Got little rewards from it in Sunday school. That’s who you need to talk to.”

Rayne only vaguely remembers the name.

“I don’t know. I’d heard he’d gone a little crazy,” Mary Jo says. “That snake handling business always made me feel funny.”

“Good Baptist that you are,” Raymond says.

Mary Jo shakes her head. “Well, I just don’t think there’s much sense in it.”

“And all the things you seeing around here make sense?”

“He’s a snake-handler?” Rayne says.

“Don’t know if he does that anymore, but when we was kids, he sure did it. His daddy, too. Heck, the whole community around Temple did,” Raymond says.

“Bless his heart. He’s an ugly man.”

“Mary Jo!”

“I’m just being honest. He got blowed up back when the wire factory exploded.”

Rayne lifts a spoonful of blackeyed peas to her mouth.

“God used him anyway. Smart man, I’m telling ya,” Raymond says and points at Rayne, his hand trembling. “If there’s someone who knows more about the Bible I don’t know where you gonna find him.”

“And he’s in Temple?”

“Yeah, back off the road, got a house and everything out that ways.”

“The name of the church?”

Raymond’s mashed potatoes fall as he lifts them to his mouth.

“Watch where you’re sticking it,” she says, reaching over and dabbing at the white trail on his shirt.

Raymond’s laughing and slapping at Mary Jo’s hand. “I can clean it woman.” Between laughs, “Don’t know if it’s called anything now. Back when I was there it was Temple Holiness Congregation, Church of God, Pentecost.”

“Service would done be over once you said welcome to the Temple Holiness Congregation, Church of God, Pentecost. A church must think it’s something else to have all those names,” Mary Jo says.

“Oh, they’re just trying to cover all the bases,” he says, balling up the napkin he’s used to clean his shirt.

That he doesn't protest surprises Rayne as she leads him back to the bedroom. Dishes clink behind as Mary Jo cleans up. She eases him down into the bed. He's breathing heavy.

"I can take my clothes off."

"I'll leave you to do it." Rayne gives him a quick hug and turns on the lamp at his bedside table.

Back in the kitchen Rayne towel dries the dishes once Mary Jo, who's humming "Have Faith in God," rinses.

"He seemed in good spirits," Rayne says.

"You're here. And safe."

Mary Jo's humming, the water running, clinks of the dishes, are the only sounds to interrupt the silence.

She watches Mary Jo bent over the sink as she scrubs the dishes and hums, tilting her head side to side along to the melody.

"I know you don't care for my visions," Mary Jo says after the last refrain of the hymn.

Rayne towels, now looking down at the plate. "I just don't understand them."

"Never saw why. You're my blood, you know?" She hands a glass to her.

The water pours from the faucet between them. Outside the willow is hardly visible.

"I saw how it ends."

"How what ends?"

Mary Jo's wiping tears from her cheeks.

"Don't be dark, Mama," she says. "Lord knows I got enough of that right now."

"If it's true, don't matter if it's dark."

Rayne resigns, "What'd you see?"

Mary Jo hands the last plate to Rayne and walks to the table and sits. Rayne turns to her, rubbing the plate.

Mary Jo situates her sweatshirt and, once she's wiped her cheeks again, puts both hands, palms down, on the table.

"Raymond's skin was paper-thin and his legs shook. There was leaves everywhere. He was gripping the walker. I told him I don't know how many times he didn't need to be outside. I don't even know how he made it so far without me. He must've snuck out that morning around breakfast time. He was always an ornery cuss.

She doesn't look at Rayne, eyes affixed to the other wall, staring into the refrigerator.

"The man in the water waved his hand, and Raymond nodded at him, pushing his walker bit by bit toward the water.

"I reckon I'd never seen the man with the lantern before. He was bald and wore a navy blue Sunday suit. He didn't have an expression, wasn't happy or sad, just there. He didn't call out to Raymond, didn't say a word at all, just kept waving his arm, and Raymond kept inching the walker toward the bank.

"Let me help you down there, Raymond,' I said to him.

"I done told you, Mary Jo. He ain't waving at you,' he said back.

"The feet of his walker crunched the leaves. The smell of the wet ground filled up my nose, one of the best smells you'll smell your whole life.

After placing the plate in the drain, Rayne sits down on the far side of the table, facing the willow.

"He'd almost made it to the bank. The sun shone right into my eyes so that I couldn't see the man in the water and Raymond was just a shadow. But after a moment I saw he wasn't moving forward any longer but was turning around. The shadow moved toward me. The man waved something furious. Raymond turned back to him, and held a trembling finger up in the air, 'just a minute,' he hollered, 'I ain't ready yet,' he hollered, and turned back and struggled toward me. He was shaking so bad. Every muscle was like jello. It's a wonder he could even hold onto the walker.

"He stopped beside me, grabbed tight to the side of the walker and eased himself down onto the ground.

"I didn't reckon it'd look like this,' he said and situated himself on the ground."

"It's a beautiful day,' I said. It weren't a lie. The whole place glistened after yesterday's rain.

"Mary Jo,' he said and grunted just a bit, still trying to get in a comfortable spot on the ground. 'I want you to sell the farm. Sell it to those farmers who been out there. Sell the house if you want, too, move into the city.'

"You know I don't want to live in the city,' I said. 'Especially now with the dark times.'

"I pushed myself up using a tree beside me but fell down on my butt. Raymond let out a laugh, and I laughed, too, though I wanted to cry. He leaned over and took my hand, and I knew we was both thinking about the same thing, thinking about all those years. He squeezed my hand real tight like, tighter than I'd ever felt him squeeze it. The sky

darkened then, and the shadows came down all around us. The man in the water was still there, waving him in, though we could hardly see him in the moment. Then a lantern appeared in his hand, and his plain face looked something frightening. The light moved up and down following the movement of his arm.

“I reckon you got another twenty years before you go.’

“Something inside me felt like it just opened up and let a rush of sadness in when he said twenty years.

“I knew it didn’t always work the way you wanted it to, knew that the Good Lord had his way, and did what he wanted. Timothy said once that when God was silent, when he didn’t say yes to your prayer, it didn’t mean that he’d not heard it or that he’d not answered it. Sometimes silence just means no. God wasn’t being unreasonable. Raymond had had a long life, worked hard, and it was time to go. I knew I was being a bit selfish in wanting him to stay. But twenty years, if it was true, was sure a long time to be alone.

“Above us the sky opened up and all the stars were shining. I thought about how old the stars are, how I’d heard once that the light they give off is already millions or billions of years old, or something like that. That’s a beautiful story, I guess.

“The man was still waving his lantern, when I walked back and Raymond was still just sitting there, his face as handsome as it was the first time I saw him in my daddy’s store.

“That was my vision, Darling. The Lord showed me what was to come.”

Rayne’s spent the day pushing Nathan’s swaying body away, but as they both stand and her mother embraces her and says goodnight, she thinks she sees a faint light, just a dot, through the kitchen window.

Mary Jo’s footsteps patter down the hallway, and her bedroom door shuts.

Upstairs in her old room she opens the window and looks over the front lawn. The weathervane creaks and rattles. From her pocket she pulls the flask. When she unscrews the cap, she pours the liquor out the window. It patters against the tin metal roof of the porch.

The Gospel According to No One

When I was eighteen, one of you told me I'd inherited my father's property, that I'd come into wealth, that there were farmers out in my field, renting the property and that I'd amassed quite a fortune, as they'd been paying rent to a trust in my name all this time. Mom and Dad had a will, and though they left me to wander in the wilderness for years, they'd made plans that I'd be taken care of.

But I had other things to learn, see? I went to your schools. I studied hard, tried to make something. And I did well. I learned everything you got to teach, and I even taught you, for years even—a whole lifetime. But it was in my head the whole time, what I was gonna do, what you really needed, even as I was a part of you.

Y'all didn't see me in those early years, but I was there all along, there and nowhere, moving down streets at dusk, at midnight while y'all was out about celebrating your pockets, selling your souls. I was there taking it away.

Verily I say unto you her flesh was rotten as mine. I knew her so that she'd feel true despair, a daughter of the whore, she became a whore, and the sins of her mother will be visited seven times upon her. Her face against the brick walls of the university, I spat on her and pushed her into nothingness. And she weren't the only one. I done raped your young brides, but only cause you raped them first. I didn't do it by raping, though that's how you probably read it because you wouldn't understand a metaphor if it straddled your face. Raping's what y'all do.

But I got old, so I moved out of the apartment in the city and into the old house. I worked for months restoring it to its former glory. I enlisted the help of hired hands to help me fix up the place.

One day when he was hammering, my servant looked up at me from the floor, his jaw clenched over a thick wad of tobacco and reckoned I should return to the Holiness church that my dad left to wear the suit. It wasn't long 'til I was back there, swinging my Bible into the empty air, telling those folks that judgment was a coming. They'd not a clue what judgment I meant. They just clapped their hands because they thought deliverance was coming upon 'em.

Chapter 11

Footsteps on the staircase draw Timothy from sleep to the kitchen floor, Tracey at his side, towel unravelled under her head. Tense, maybe broken, he rises on one elbow and claws at his eyes with his free hand. Blinds pale yellow, the sun barely up. Footsteps creak higher in the foyer until a knock fills the apartment.

Tracey's eyes are half open, only the whites visible.

He takes the towel and wraps it into a ball again, stuffing it under her head.

"It's over, isn't it?" Sherman says from the bedroom.

Timothy rises, stretches, and walks to the bedroom, stopping at the door.

"Cops?" Sherman says.

The knock sounds again.

"I should answer," Timothy says.

"Imagine that you've gone to get a biscuit."

"I'll check the peephole."

"Genius."

"I'm sleepy."

Sherman grumbles and covers his face with his hands.

Through the peephole, Timothy sees Silas in the foyer, head down, lips pulled back as if he's about to whistle. He knocks again.

Noise rises from the kitchen.

Footsteps again, fading this time.

Back in the kitchen, Tracey's jerking like a fish, but the pipe keeps her in place. Timothy throws on a jacket and rushes downstairs.

"Silas," he calls out just as the front entrance shuts.

It opens again and Silas sticks in his head. "Hey, Timothy." He opens the door and stands halfway in.

Meeting him at the bottom of the stairs, Timothy shakes his hand, the first light slicing through the opening. Timothy brings up his other hand to shield his eyes.

"I forget not everyone's an early riser," Silas says.

Timothy nods as they walk onto the porch. "I'm surprised to see you."

"Well," he says, pulling off his cowboy hat. "Just felt so bad about how things went."

"No explanation needed."

He holds the hat over his chest. "I reckon, as much as you think you understand, it's gotta hurt."

“I’m okay, really.”

Timothy’s hands quiver, from the morning chill or from the world awaiting upstairs, he’s not sure.

“I been praying without ceasing about this.”

Timothy wishes he could say the same.

“I don’t understand it one lick, but I want you to know I don’t think you’re out to trick anyone. It ain’t a magic show you was doing.”

“I’m thankful, Silas.”

“That first morning when you showed me and Donny, I didn’t feel the same as him. How can that be, you reckon? How can one person think something’s God, and feel good about it, and the other think it’s from the devil?”

“Happened to Jesus, too.”

“I remember that, I think. Pharisees called him Beelzebub. Funny word isn’t it?” he chuckles. “How come the devil has such a funny name?”

Timothy shakes his head and grabs his elbows, the jacket only a windbreaker.

Silas rubs his feet against the brick porch and hums. “Well, it probably ain’t much consolation. I don’t know what’s going to happen. Just wanted you to know I don’t think you evil.”

Timothy purses his lips and extends a hand, but Silas takes him in both arms. “Was in Nam, you know,” he whispers at his ear.

Timothy pats him on the back and pulls away, “Thank you, Silas.”

“Just remember that if you find yourself back there, doing whatever it was that you did, you keep yourself level. Remember it’s over. War’s over there, I always tell myself, not here.”

Timothy rests against a column. “I think it’s everywhere.”

“Well, you ain’t gotta fight it.”

The cowboy hat back on his head, he turns and heads toward the Silverado parked opposite Timothy’s truck. As he swings open the door, he throws a hand up. Timothy mirrors him and heads upstairs.

#

“You got fired for flying?” Sherman says, standing in the hallway, one arm propping him up.

“You heard?”

“Cracked the window.”

“Surprised?”

“Not really.” Still in his button-up and loosened tie, Sherman’s wobbled into the kitchen and, after turning the chair around at the table to face the stove, he’s eased into it, setting down his pills. Timothy pulls down a skillet from the cabinet.

“Jesus Christ,” Sherman says. “Look at her.”

On the floor, Tracey’s given up jerking the rope, hands above her head.

“I’m sorry.”

Sherman sighs.

Timothy steps back and forth over Tracey, breaking eggs into a bowl, taking a spoon from a drawer and mixing. “How’s your leg?”

“I’m breathing.” Sherman twists the tiny orange container in his hand.

“You need to take four of those a day.”

The pan sizzles as he drops in the mix.

“Making bacon, too?”

Timothy turns. “I need to get her up, feed her.”

“What do you do when it rests here?” Sherman says, pointing to his chest. “It’s all bundled up. It’s worse than my leg.”

Timothy turns back to the eggs. “Ride it out.”

“That’s my problem. I gotta act.”

“I think you’ve done enough of that. You’re lucky you didn’t go into shock last night.”

“I was in shock all right.”

When done, Timothy dumps the eggs into a bowl and places them behind Sherman on the table. After leaning over and untying Tracey from the piping, he helps her up. At least she didn’t piss the floor, he thinks.

She moves in short steps, Timothy guiding her with one hand on the arm and the other on the back. She breathes through the nose and grunts with each step.

Her black hair’s damp, the fringe separated on her forehead. Once Timothy’s eased her into the kitchen chair, Sherman turns his chair to the table.

Timothy walks back to the kitchen and rummages for plates and utensils. “What is this stuff, Sherman?”

“Eggs, right?”

“It makes animals out of them,” Timothy says, sitting down at the table with milk and orange juice stacked atop the dishes.

Sherman hasn’t looked at Tracey since Timothy sat her down. He scoops out a glob of eggs, drops them on his plate.

“It’s Vision.”

“Same drug that put the kids in the psych ward?”

Sherman nods, unscrewing the cap of his meds and downing one with a gulp of orange juice.

“Will you feed her?”

“Godammit.”

Sherman reaches behind Tracey’s head with both hands and undoes the gag.

Rather than scream as Timothy expects, her mouth hangs open and noiseless. Her head drops, chin on chest. Tears streak down the sides of her face.

Sherman wipes them, moves the fringe back into place, fingers picking through until the short hair forms a solid black rectangle on her forehead. With the back of his hand, he caresses her cheeks, her forehead.

“Come on, you gotta eat, beautiful,” Sherman says.

A slight lip quiver meets his affection.

“Tracey?” his voice breaking.

The irises have reappeared. They jitter, then still, focused on the bowl of eggs.

“Sherman...”

“The fuck’s wrong with her?”

“She needs to be with the others.”

Sherman swings to backhand Timothy, his elbow knocking over the orange juice. His wrist rests in Timothy’s hand.

“Never again, Sherman” Timothy says, his fingers a Vise-grip around.

Sherman pulls loose only as Timothy lets go. He leans over to pick up the juice, pulsing bright yellow onto the linoleum. “Got any paper towels?”

Timothy rises, legs of his chair screeching against the floor. From the counter he grabs the paper towels and returns, crouching to clean up the mess.

“Things happen too fast in my head, Timothy. I didn’t mean it, but, for Christ’s sake, we can’t take her to the ward.”

#

Renovation, he thinks. The train depot can be used as a meeting place, a banquet hall, a civic center, a dance hall, a place for wedding receptions, corporate galas. They’ll fill the space with opulence, pretension. It’ll matter again. Right now grass breaks the pavement and hedges of weeds surround the building, but it’ll be something again. It can look backwards, respectful of the past, but also be accessible to assholes. I can do it. I can

help, he thinks. He can propose his idea to the mayor. They'll gut it, keep the brick walls, redo the ceiling, roof, the hardwood floors, and eaves over the platforms outside.

He sees the colors, the lights on from outside, bodies moving in its frame. People will plug their ears as the train roars past. Part of the charm. A 1940s Hollywood newscaster's voice speaks over the black and white images of people moving in and out, the mayor cutting the ribbon with giant scissors, everyone in formal attire patting Sherman on the back, Sherman waving to the camera.

But the frames deteriorate, burnt celluloid still spinning in his mind, distorting images, people dying in the fire.

He lifts the eggs to her mouth, only the red-eye, outbound train howling through, the station left falling in on itself.

Yellow mass falls from her lips to the table. He knuckles her chin to ease her mouth shut. "Come on, chew."

He puts down the spoon and grips her jaw, moving it forward and back, up and down.

"Let's just give her some juice," Timothy says.

Tracey wails, "I need another one," her head drooping again. Jerking back and forth, twine stretching, she's trying to get out. As she screams, Sherman scoots the chair over and puts his hand over her mouth. She bites. Timothy jumps up, grabs the dish rag and gag rope, and, from behind, ties her mouth.

In the scuffle they have not heard the door open. But both Sherman and Timothy see the intruder, standing upright, eyes wide, mouth agape.

"Timothy?"

"Susannah."

Her hair's bunched into a ponytail, the Walgreens apron tied round, the nametag fastened at her left breast.

She looks down at the table, then at Tracey, then Sherman.

"Professor Thomas?"

Sherman nods. "We're having eggs. Might be some orange juice left."

Tracey's brows are furrowed. She's burrowing a hole through Susannah with her eyes.

"What is this?"

She lifts the pills from the table, twisting the container in her hand. "It was you," she says, turning to leave.

"Wait, Susannah," Timothy calls.

The door slams and Timothy's following behind, swinging it open again and descending the stairs.

Sherman turns to Tracey who's hissing through her nose, her eyes back in her head. He doesn't know when he'd gotten too far away from himself to cry, but he wishes now he weren't a stranger. To be known, he thinks, and to know, are the only two things he's ever wanted.

#

Gripping the side of her car door, Timothy crouches. She's put the key in the ignition, beeps sounding from the dash. She fastens her seatbelt.

"Hear what I have to say," Timothy says.

"It won't make any sense."

"Let me blabber, then."

She leans back onto the headrest. "You're in trouble. And it's real."

"They're victims, Susannah. You saw the girl. She's been poisoned."

"Do you know what that man has become since you left?"

"I do."

"And you're going to invite it, help him?"

"When Jesus—"

"Don't sermonize, Timothy."

"As if it's irrelevant?"

"You know what I mean. Everyone knows who he is. You know he screwed that woman. On his desk. In broad daylight? And the drugs?"

"Don't say screwed."

"Fucked, then. No wonder they're sick."

Timothy winces.

"Don't be self-righteous. Sure Sherman's said it plenty."

"Sherman prefers godammit. I knew about the drugs. He's in it." Timothy lifts a hand to his neck. "These people want to kill him for saving that girl."

"Hardly looks like saving."

"The cops will want to put him away for the drugs. There's no good ending."

"And not for you, either."

"What choice do I have?"

"You're harbouring a fugitive."

"He gets better, he's gone, okay?"

"I'll call the cops," she says.

“And me?”

It’s the last appeal, he knows. He’s asked too much. If he could go back to the opening scene, he’d never have ambled to Walgreens, reintroduced himself to her world.

She’s catching her breath, gripping the steering wheel, “I should’ve known something was up last night. You won’t see a therapist. You think you’re too strong for that.”

“It’s the timing.”

Her hands move from the wheel as she turns in her seat and clutches Timothy’s face. She pulls him in, opens her mouth on his. It’s not supplication. They’re too far for that now. She’s distilling and pouring out, Timothy knows, and if he could cup it in his hands and drink it, he would, but she pulls back, shakes her head, and turns the engine, resting one hand on the gear shift, before enough pours out.

Putting the car in reverse, “When I leave here, that’s it.”

The car inches backward. “Don’t call, don’t show up at my house, don’t show up at Walgreens.”

Timothy moves to dodge the door, falling on his elbows. She leans over, grabs the handle, and jerks it shut.

Once in the middle of the lot, she’s in drive, and Timothy’s watching her taillight reflectors glimmer in the midmorning sun.

If he stays here long enough, she’ll come back. She can’t leave this way. It can’t be the last time he’ll see her, he thinks.

Ms. Grant’s oversized Buick is missing from the parking lot.

One less thing to worry about--as if accounting for things is important.

Susannah is one less thing, too.

He stands, rubs the gravel from his elbows, and sits on the brick porch, crossing his legs, burying his face in his hands, and leaning against the column.

But it isn’t that simple. She’s not an entry on a list of grievances. She’s not a liability. He knows now, with only the smell of car exhaust left behind, that, all along, she’s meant only to illuminate and to lift him. He should be trailing her now, waving his arms, pleading. That’s what she’s wanted.

Instead he covers his face and accepts the reckoning due to him only, but divided between them in equal measure.

He rises, bracing himself against the column, opens the door, and ascends the staircase, a choice made, a route mapped.

Timothy stands next to the table, fingering his elbows. "What was their plan, Sherman?"

Tracey's back on the floor, the towel beneath her head. Sherman sits where Timothy left him before.

"If I knew, I'd tell you. They gave me the drugs a couple of weeks ago and told me to sell them, then just give them away. I had to email them and say who took them, where they lived. I just thought they were out to make a buck. When they told me to give them away, I figured there was a surplus and they wanted to hook kids in. I mean, who can think up something like this? I've sold for them a while, mostly prescription drugs, Quaaludes, cocaine, meth, some heroin."

"Jesus."

"Your girlfriend going to tell the cops?"

"Don't think so."

"You should lock the door."

"I've had a lot on my mind."

"Well, rule #1 of Operation Sherman Fuck-up: Lock the door."

Timothy sits at the kitchen table and takes Ferrell's box in his hands.

Sherman's looking over his shoulder at Tracey, "Gave her some OJ. Well, forced it on her." He turns back, head glistening with streaks of sweat running down from his scalp. "You should keep that thing shut." He pushes it to the far side, back against the wall.

"So they're brainwashing them," Timothy says.

"Stripping egos."

Bracing himself on the table, Sherman lowers himself to the floor. He keeps the bad leg straight. The chair topples backwards and clamours against the floor. On his ass he slides across the floor until he's beside Tracey. He reclines, one arm over her as Timothy the night before.

"What are you doing?" Timothy says.

His voice breaking again, "Can I hold my lover?"

Sherman lifts a hand to her face. He whispers but Timothy can't hear. Closer to her ear now, his nose buried in her hair, he continues. He drops his hand to her stomach and rests it there.

Timothy pokes at his eggs, cold now, and drinks the remaining juice from the carton.

"She told me she loved me," Sherman says. "Right before."

Timothy grabs the dishes from the table and takes them to the sink, sidestepping the two.

“I didn’t say it back.”

“But you have,” Timothy says.

“I don’t remember. I must’ve.”

“Do you love her?”

“I’d be taken for a fool. It’s my fault, don’t you see? I was a selfish prick.”

Timothy walks to the edge of the dining area, leaving the dishes for later. “You need some help up?”

“I’m okay for now.”

The money Timothy has will float the three of them only a while, a month at the most. But with Tracey’s outbursts, he’s not sure how long he can keep them. Everything in him cries out to let her loose. It’s not right, not for anyone, he thinks.

He’s surveying the room, the dirty dishes, Sherman and Tracey, the empty juice carton, the blinds shut on the window set in the back door. Everything converges here, he thinks. He leans over at the table and grabs the box, hoists it above his head.

“The fuck you doing?” Sherman says. “Don’t!”

Timothy swings his arms, throwing down the box. It explodes against the floor, pieces scattering across the tiles, sliding under Sherman’s foot, Tracey’s thigh, the hands and snake and fragment in pieces. Timothy, hunched over, breathes deep and lifts a small piece of the vase from the ruins, throws it down, and crushes it underfoot.

Chapter 12

Rayne meets Darrell at the front door of her parents'. He's in a corduroy blazer and checked tie and holding out a fistful of flowers.

"These are nice, Darrell."

"No one else would take 'em."

She smiles and offers a short, perfunctory hug. "Come in."

They walk the length of the hallway to the kitchen.

Mary Jo's standing over the stove, one hand on a skillet. She turns, "Oh my," she says. "Wildflowers."

"From Darrell."

"I love wildflowers. You pick them yourself? Sure can use some brightening up 'round here," She opens a cabinet above, rummaging until she pulls out a vase, violet and translucent.

"Yes ma'am."

She pours water in from the sink and sets it on the table.

Rayne lowers in the flowers. "See you in a bit, Mama."

"Hope y'all find what you're looking for."

Rayne hugs her and nods.

She wants to say she no longer knows what she's looking for.

She wants to say she's done with it.

She wants to say she's going upstairs to sleep it off, all of it.

#

There's been nothing but silence the past few days. The G.B.I. says Vision is off the streets--returned to the abyss. No other hangers, either. The parents of the missing children, and of the kids in the psych ward, are livid. And more than once she's taken calls from Cliff's parents. "No word." That's all she can say. "No word." The silence is loud. It says she's failed, Cliff is dead, Sherman, too, and she did nothing to save them.

Outside her high heels knock against the wooden porch. Over her shoulder she's strapped an oversized purse with photocopies of the letters. Because Dr. Reverend Jack Tribes isn't listed in the phonebook, she's going in cold, hoping he'll entertain questions.

"I ain't touching a snake," Darrell says.

Rayne turns and half smiles as they descend the steps.

Inside the Explorer, cigarettes lit, Darrell backs into the yard and pulls onto the drive.

#

When she lay down to sleep the night before, it was 1988, and Sherman lay beside her. Her parents were out praising Jesus at Horseshoe Bend during the first of a three-night revival. He'd driven over in the El Camino, and they got down to business. His hair was curly, full, his body toned but not muscular. Very little hair covered his chest. Every movement was novel. He was her second, and, as a lover, he was more thoughtful and aware of her anatomy than the first.

Afterwards, they lay supine smoking cigarettes, a box fan set at the side of the bed to blow the smoke out the window.

"Let's get married. Right now," Sherman said.

"Where will we live? When we're married, for real, I mean. North end? Downtown? Out in the country like my parents?"

Sherman laughed and reached to the nightstand to knock ash into a coffee mug. "Hell no." He dragged and puffed. "We're getting out of Palaver. Going to Atlanta."

Rayne pulled the sheet over her breasts with her free hand. "What's great about Atlanta?"

"Stuff going on. Music, museums, parades, fine dining. You know, culture."

"We got all those things here."

Sherman shook his head. "We need to take some trips. Bob Seger's gonna be there in a few weeks. How 'bout I drive you out there?"

"Bob Seger's culture? No way. Waylon Jennings is culture."

"Um."

"Besides, what am I going to do in Atlanta?"

"What do you want to do anyway?"

"I'm going to school."

"Plenty of those. Me, too. I'm going to be a professor."

Rayne laughed and knocked him with a pillow. "A professor of what? I have to help you with your math homework."

"I like history."

She stubbed out the cigarette, turned to face him, and put an arm across his chest. "All you like are trains."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"I bet I'm the only girl who didn't laugh when you showed her your train car collection."

"You did."

"Oh, right," she said, laughing again.

Sherman moved from under her arm and stood, buck naked, sucking on his cigarette as he paced the room.

Rayne swung her arm to push away the smoke. "Stay on this side of the fan."

"We'll go out every night, listen to classical music, eat in high risers."

"Where we getting this money?"

"I'll write books."

"About trains?"

"Why not?"

"They'll sell by the thousands, I'm sure."

"What's stuck in your craw?"

"I'm not so sure I want to get married anyway. I'm too young."

Sherman was true to his promise and moved to Atlanta. Rayne was true, too, staying and enrolling at what was then Palaver College. They wrote the occasional letter and met a couple of times on his visits back.

Rayne had been to Atlanta only a handful of times. She hated the traffic, the noise, the smell of the freeway. She'd gone out for training, workshops, and seminars, but had never stayed more than a couple of nights.

When Sherman later found he couldn't escape Palaver's draw and moved back, it was too late. His interest in trains had become too tedious and theoretical for Rayne to tolerate and her interest in criminal investigations too practical and "quotidian"—a word Rayne looked up after he'd said it—for him.

And it was the same time and again, them proposing marriage and her proposing delays, uncertainties. After Sherman it was Jesup, then Dale, then Carl, and finally Cliff.

#

"Now this is country," Darrell says, flicking his cigarette out the window and lighting another.

An overcast sky reaches over the back roads. The late October air through the window is cool, dank.

"Where my parents live used to be like this."

"Then they put all those spec house subdivisions up."

"Hawthorne Heights. Castlebury Hills. Crestview Estates."

"Fancy names for split-levels."

Every hill and curve in the road feels dramatic in the Explorer. Darrell pulls the console under his arm up, grabbing a pack of nicotine gum.

"Defeats the purpose, doesn't it?"

“Not when the purpose is nicotine.” He tilts his head to drop one in from the pack. “I’d be chewing, too, if I could stand the spittin’. I haven’t slept a wink. I hate to think that, whoever these folks are, they’re hiding in whatever god-forsaken hole they’re in just waiting to jump out and do it all again.”

After a right on J-Bar, they turn past the sign, Temple Holiness Congregation Church of God, Pentecost, an old wooden beam on a power pole, hand lettering in black.

The gravel pings the underside of the Explorer. It’s a long driveway, maybe a half-mile from J Bar Rd, poplars and elms, in yellow and orange, thick on either side of the road all the way up to the vanishing point.

Once out in the clearing, the church appears on the right, peeling paint on the clapboard. A short cinderblock wall forms the foundation of the church, a solid grey line from the back and around the front, broken only by the porch descending into the church yard. Parked out front are three vehicles, a Le Sabre, a Tacoma, and an ancient Cadillac.

“Not sure we’ll find a seat,” Darrell quips. “Oh look at that back there.”

Darrell’s hand’s in her face, pointing to the back of the church. “That’s a nice one.”

Rayne turns to see the Ford pickup. “Dad used to have an old Ford.”

“I could fix one of them up nice.”

Darrell swings right and parks next to the Le Sabre. They extinguish their cigarettes and hop out. “This is a nice piece of land. Look out there,” Darrell says. “Like the Hammondtree Place.”

The leaves are thick around the lot from the maple and oak at both sides of the porch. Some fall now, landing on their path up the steps.

The church isn’t like any she’s seen of its size. It’s small but wants to be huge, has the feeling of huge, whatever that means, she thinks. There’s a gabled roof and two towers with steeples on either side. Rust covers the tin roof.

It’s hard to imagine, living within such a small radius all her life, that there are places unexplored.

Once up the steps and at the door, they stop and turn to inspect the field again.

Rayne doesn’t want to go in, thinking the effort a waste of time. But Darrell turns first, thumb on handle, and pushes open the door.

They must be late, she thinks.

Through the door, the muffled sound of someone plucking ragtime at the piano.

The foyer is dark for midmorning, the windows looking out onto the yard covered by thick velvet curtains. The piano all but drowns out the voices of those singing, only

faint phrases rising between the hammering of the keys. She recognizes the tune now, “Standing on the Promises.”

“Look at this,” Darrell whispers, nudging Rayne.

Rayne turns. On the right side of the foyer, above a defunct communion table, a black and white portrait hangs in a bronze frame. In the half dark, she makes out an old man standing beside a woman. He’s tall, his head almost reaching the top of the frame. Both dressed in Sunday best. The woman’s sitting, hands meeting in her lap. Behind them a cross hangs over a baptism pool. The woman smiles, but the man’s got on his Holy Man-o-God face. Rayne leans and shines her cell phone to inspect the plate at the bottom. “The Reverend Oliver and Miriam Tribes, 1942.”

Darrell’s at the doorway leading into the sanctuary. He nods toward the music. Rayne moves behind him.

Two lines of pews, maybe fifteen down each side, run the length of the sanctuary in a descending slope. Only two bodies occupy them, one on either side, a bald headed man, tiny framed and hunched over, and a woman with a thick, white beehive. At the bottom of the slope, the platform rises, a giant oak pulpit on top.

The walls are wood panels, the carpet a dark green. Exposed wires dangle from the ceiling around the chandeliers.

In a chair on the raised platform, to the left of the pulpit and back a few feet, sits Tribes. His head down, hands cradling a hymnal, one foot beats the platform in rhythm to the song.

Hunched over the piano is another ancient body, thin wisps of white hair combed over a bald head. A thin tie falls down the length of his shirt. Rayne and Darrell edge into a pew at the back, left side, Darrell first, going in sideways, grabbing the pew in front to balance himself. He fumbles halfway and eases down. Rayne follows behind.

They’re on the third refrain of “Standing on the Promises” now. Rayne knows the words but refuses to sing. Darrell hums along though it’s apparent he doesn’t know the song from Adam.

Just like the Baptists, there are two more hymns. The piano player steps down from the platform and around to the front of the pulpit, picking up an offering plate. In a gravelly voice, he offers prayers of thanksgiving and asks the Lord to bless the money given. “Amen,” he says, turning to face the four congregants.

Rayne always forgets this part. She moves the flap from the top of her purse and pulls a five-dollar bill from her pocketbook.

Darrell reaches for his billfold and pulls out a ten.

A single coin drops into the plate at the front of the church. On the other side, the woman shakes her head.

Rayne wonders how the place survives.

The pianist takes short but quick steps toward them. He smiles, flashing yellow teeth as they drop the folded bills into the plate.

He returns the money to the communion table and offers another prayer.

Rayne inspects the stained-glass. On the window closest to them, a serpent on all fours, more like a lizard than a snake, crouches between Adam and Eve. The lovers bite an apple over the body of the snake.

On the next is a man in what looks to be a dungeon, holding his head, broad yellow streaks to indicate the sun far above.

Rayne touches Darrell's elbow, lifting him out of his prayer. "Look," she whispers.

The others are just as strange, a skeleton in a fire, arms akimbo, a snake slithering out of Christ's mouth as he's mounted on the cross, Moses adrift in the Red Sea, holding his staff above the current.

Darrell hums. "Something else."

Songs sung, prayers lifted, and offerings given, stillness swallows the place, only the wood of the walls popping and creaking at intervals as the cold sets in. Then the old woman coughs, and the pianist sits at the front.

Reverend Tribes is as still as the building, hands clutching the armrests of his chair. Only now does he lift his head. He stands. His suit is too big for his body, navy blue and double breasted. She sees the bright pink flesh, the deep lines covering the right side of his head. Once he's limped behind the pulpit, her stomach turns. She's ready for hellfire and damnation, snakes writhing in the people's hands.

"I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord,'" he begins. His arm reaches to the pulpit and opens the Bible before him.

"It's good to see visitors this morning," he says, not looking up from the pulpit.

He's Midwestern, Rayne thinks, not detecting a southern accent. The voice is hardly interesting for a minister, weak, a bit nasally.

"Take your Bibles and turn to..."

Rayne zones out, looking at the images in the stained glass and Tribes' head. The sermon is from Philippians. He compares the original Greek to the English translations. He wants the five of them to understand joy and to live it out. She fears the box she

knows he'll bring out. That's probably the ultimate answer, of course: Joy is holding a snake in the air, proving one's faith through utter stupidity.

He stands rigid behind the pulpit, turning pages of his notes, hardly looking up.

Rayne remembers her high school literature teacher talking about Jonathan Edwards's delivery of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Her teacher said Edwards was timid and could hardly see the text, holding it up to his face. Rayne loved the image. It certainly added levity to an otherwise horrifying text.

Just wait, she thinks, any moment now...

But it never happens. Even keeled and monotone throughout, the sermon is full of encouragement. They sing "I Surrender All," and the pianist offers a closing prayer.

Reverend Tribes has moved to the foyer during the final prayer. After the pianist says "amen" again, the congregants file out of the church, all of three of them clutching the sides of the pews as they move up the aisle to the foyer.

How's ole Finley? He's okay. Store's doing good. Haven't seen the young'uns in a while. You tell them I said hello.

The door shuts after the last one shuffles out and Rayne and Darrell stand. Reverend Tribes walks into the sanctuary and stops at the end of the row. He squints and cocks his head to the side.

"I reckon I can spot a Hammondtree a mile away," he says. "But I don't know you."

Darrell stands, extends a hand. "I'm Darrell."

She sees the burns now. The small scar lines, the pebble-like skin. The iris of his right eye is a blue, glassy smear, his ear half the size of his other.

"We haven't had any new faces here in a while. Did you enjoy the service?" Tribes says, taking his hand.

"Was good," Darrell says.

"No snakes was a plus," Rayne says, standing. They shake as well.

"Oh, we haven't done that in here in years, not since my father pastored. A bit too primitive for me."

"I'm glad to hear it," Darrell says.

Rayne starts, "Reverend Tribes—"

He smiles. "Just Jack is fine."

"We're from the police department, working on a case, wondered if you might be able to help us out."

“Oh my,” he says, flattening imagined wrinkles in his suit jacket. “These are dark times in Palaver, aren’t they? The top of his right hand is scarred as well. “I’ve hardly been able to turn on the television without word of evil seeping into the place.”

He waves the burnt hand, walks away, and Rayne and Darrell work themselves out of the pew.

“How’s the farm?” he asks over his shoulder as he limps down the aisle.

“Dad’s been renting it out, hasn’t been able to work in a while. He’s sick.”

“Oh, my. He’s a righteous man. And your mother, well, I didn’t know her well, but she seems a kind soul.”

Before they’re down at the pulpit, he’s pulled three metal chairs from the choir loft and has climbed down the steps and set them in front of the communion table.

“Please,” he says. They form the points of a triangle, Tribes with his back at the communion table, Rayne and Darrell at either side facing him.

“You got a lot of land out there, too,” Darrell says. “Ever farmed?”

“Oh, I farm people,” he says as they sit, swinging his arm toward the congregation. “Jesus says the fields are white with harvest.”

Hope you have crop insurance, Rayne thinks.

“My father used to farm with your grandfather,” Tribes continues. “Well, at the same time. Maybe even worked together some, who knows, back when farmers did the good work, the true work.”

He looks between them, then toward the back door.

Rayne’s opening up the purse. “You don’t think farming’s true anymore?”

“Heavens no. It’s too wrapped up in the cash nexus.”

“Cash nexus?” Darrell says.

“Big money,” Tribes says. “What our families did, in the beginning, that was true farming. They planted crops for the town, not for corporations.”

“I don’t think my father could’ve lived on sales from the farmer’s market.”

“Heavens no,” Tribes says, slapping his knees. “All that’s changed, and you have to negotiate the changes in the best ways possible. So, how can I help?”

Rayne pulls out the letters, four in all, and hands them over.

“So, at each murder scene—you’ve heard about the murders?” Rayne says.

“Yes, yes,” he says, the letters close to his face. “Such a terrible thing.”

“The killer left these notes. I don’t think there’s much to go on, but the G.B.I. wanted an expert to take a look.”

"I'm not sure about being an expert," Tribes says, looking up, smiling. "But I'll take the compliment."

Rayne purses her lips. "We just want to know if you can make heads or tails of them, if they lead to any other clues or can at least shed light on the killer's intent, or whether he plans to kill again." Just in case, Rayne pulls out a picture of The Whistler. "Ever seen this man?"

He breaks focus, reaches for the image, and holds it up close and then from afar. "No, darling," he says, shaking his head. "But, then, I don't get out much."

Darrell's emptying another pile of nicotine gum pieces into his palm. He throws his hand to his mouth and crunches through the outer shells of the gum.

"It's difficult to establish any kind of consistent eschatological stand," he says, holding the papers at a distance now. "The writer quotes freely from both the Old and New Testaments, borrowing from them in order to communicate how he, or she, is bent on judgment. What do we know of the people he murdered?"

"We suspect they were dealers for him."

"Ah, thus the reason he calls them horsemen, from *Revelation*. I feel compelled to read these outside. The language," he says, shaking his head. "Or maybe the barn."

"I'm sorry."

His other hand up, his palm facing them, "No, it's okay."

Commotion rises from beyond the back wall, a bump and what sounds like moaning. Jack stands and sets the papers on the chair. "We got a bad latch back here. I better go shut the door before we get a pile of leaves in the back. Hear that wind?" He ambles up the platform in a limp and disappears through the door.

"I didn't think about the curse words," Rayne says.

Darrell wheezes in laughter.

Jack appears in the doorway again and descends the platform steps.

He takes up the papers again. "This one," he says, pointing out the note found at Nathan's apartment, "is from the book of Job. The writer equates himself with God and suggests that you don't even have a right to inquire about his identity. You are insignificant, a wretch in his sight."

Darrell shakes his head.

"It's hubris," Tribes says. "But his claim to being God is undermined in this one." He holds up the letter found at Trevor's apartment. "Here he's quoting from an obscure passage in Ezekiel about the King of Tyre. Now, of course it depends on the killer's

hermeneutical angle, but some evangelicals interpret this as an allegory of the fall of Satan. I imagine that's his purpose here."

"So he's both," Darrell says.

"Seems to think so. If you can be both, who can stop you?"

Darrell furrows his brow.

"So, the writer sees Palaver as Canaan, the promised land, but also a hell on earth—and the whore of Babylon. The difference might be related to time. Perhaps something has happened to cause a shift. But the writer also wants to make it hell on earth. He's God and the devil, and Palaver is heaven and hell and he wants to bring judgment on it. The logic is at best contradictory and, at worst, utter nonsense."

"Do you think, from this, he plans to do more?" Darrell says.

He sets the letters on his lap and flattens his suit jacket again. "You're not dealing with a theologian here. It looks as though he's just hen picked verses from the Bible randomly, without any sense of their historical or theological contexts. The man is a psychopath. He wants to swallow the whole world. But what do I know?" he says and laughs.

She imagines Sherman swinging his arms as he says "whole," but Tribes is still, both hands now on the letters.

He stacks the photocopies on his knee and passes them back to Rayne. "Anything else I can help you with?"

Rayne stuffs them back into the purse. "I have to ask about the stained-glass."

"Oh, they're beautiful, aren't they?"

He smiles, the first broad smile she's seen from him, the burnt side of his head crinkling into red ridges.

"I'm not sure beautiful's the word I'd use, but they're definitely interesting," Rayne says.

"Never seen anything like them," Darrell says.

"My father, though he was a man of the earth and the Word, dabbled in poetry. And he had an affinity for the mystics, mostly in the Apophatic tradition. I think his religious imagination got carried away at times."

Rayne nods, stands, and extends a hand. "We appreciate your time, Reverend Tribes."

"Don't mention it. I'm sorry I couldn't help more."

"Hey, I love that truck you got out there," Darrell says.

“You like old cars?” Tribes says. “That’s a golden one. I had to take out a windshield, though. I’m going to fix it up again, have it rolling in no time.” He pats Darrell on the shoulder and walks them to the front door.

“You tell Raymond I said get well and wish your mother the best. If they need me for anything, you just let me know.”

They descend the steps, Tribes disappearing into the darkness of the doorway and shutting the door. The wind picks up, scattering leaves across the church yard and moaning through the trees.

“Not very helpful, Rayne says. “Figures.”

“At least you went to church today,” Darrell says as they get in the Explorer and shut the doors.

Neither speaks on the trek back. Darrell smacks the nicotine gun and smokes, and Rayne follows the roadways with her eyes. The trees break as they cross a bridge over the Little Nee Nee River. The early afternoon sun beats down upon her in the Explorer, and she’s begun sweating. She leans over to turn off the heat.

“What’s the apophatic tradition?” Darrell says.

“No idea.”

When they pull down the Hammondtree drive, an ambulance is parked out front. She pulls her phone from her purse. *Five missed calls.*

The Gospel According to No One

So the first time I knew it for sure, hid the word as endless deference in my heart, felt I could put language to emptiness, was after a service at the Holiness church. Some schooled university kid done come through the country and said my theology was twisted, that I was misleading folks. I knew then my purpose.

Y'all wanna know how an old man like me did it? I'll tell you. Everybody else done gone and he was sitting in his pew looking smart, looking like he done knew everything there was to know in the world and there weren't nothing I could say to change his mind. So we sat down and he told me in so many words that he disagreed with my exegesis on a passage in Hebrews. I think it was the fourth chapter.

So I took him to the back where I keep all my snakes and he didn't like it one bit, said it was outdated. Said it was unschooled folks who practice such sorcery.

Waller sat in the chair and I told my servant that he needed some showin', so my faithful servant and messenger grabbed the educated boy's arm,s and I grabbed the snake. "Who's writhing now?" I said and spat on him. He done blown up like a balloon and was puking in the floor.

Told my servant the great God of nothing had ordained that I saw off his hands and feet for the sins of the people, the wounds of Christ, the first one to proclaim Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani. We drug him back out into the sanctuary, and I did it right there in front of the pulpit on a tarp.

We hung him up on the rafters above the baptistery and let his blood drip into the pool 'til he done bled all out. I shouted up at him, "If you're the Son of God come down off the rafters." He just swung backwards and forth, side to side and drained himself into the pool, the blood pattering against the baptistery. I poured water to clean it out and baptised my Waller in it. We buried that learned beast nowhere you'll ever find and it don't matter none, to y'all or me. He was nothing before and is nothing now. Y'all only searched a few days, not even caring 'bout your own.

Chapter 13

You have to believe, if you can believe anything I say, that I didn't go in knowing, Tracey.

Don't go to sleep.

You have to hear. This is one lesson that bears telling. I won't give you a test, though. No more of those.

You fired a rifle like Annie Oakley.

You wanted to go back to school.

You hated mustard and mayo and drowned your sandwiches in ketchup.

Lilac was your favorite flower.

This is who you are. Do you remember?

Wake up, Tracey.

You never knew this, but I tried to hang myself from the fire escape in my old apartment. Fucking thing was so rusty that when I hefted myself off the other side, the railing came down, too, didn't even jerk enough to snap my neck. Didn't even break a leg.

Don't you wish we were in the bed instead of here?

Are you warm enough? Timothy's brought us a blanket. Where would we be without him?

I almost slapped him in the face. Can you believe that?

You were honest, a student wanting to know. And I knew some things. Taught you to see history as a competition of discourse, the ruling hegemony always gets the story told. Your paper on the Ottoman Empire was dreadful but it had spirit. You had spirit, but I ignored spirit, wanting only what could hurt you—hurt both of us. That first night when we met in the Fred's parking lot and I gave you those pills, you said you'd never felt so happy.

I was on drugs and fucked up and better off dead anyway.

I know it's the fourth day, and, I promise, one day I'll shut up.

You said you'd fallen in love with me. You were in my office and I'd just pushed back some analysis you'd done—don't even remember on what—and you said it, and I wouldn't look up at you. It wasn't supposed to be that way. We were living different versions of the same story. I didn't say it back and you cried, I remember. I told you I was too old. You stormed out. I figured you'd tell someone, the dean, or another professor, and that'd be it, I'd be done.

But you were persistent, and we were back at it. You'd never done drugs, even seen the shit. When I think about what I did, right now, I can only hope my leg gets infected.

The day we made love on the desk was it. I wasn't expecting it to happen that way, and I think I, as much as I was trying to ruin myself I never wanted to do it. I don't think I ever bought Jack's ideas—not when I think back on it—I thought I was buying them. That was it. And there's where we've always diverged, Jack and me. It's always been about the hole for him, and it's always been about dynamite for me. I realized it then, when we made love on the desk.

It's not all bad. And it gets a lot better, I swear. I know you need sleep, and I'll let you soon.

I got used to us, and it seemed to me, though I couldn't articulate it then, that it was good, and it made me uncomfortable. As much as it was built on the shaky foundation of my delusions, it was something, not nothing.

You were born poor, dirt poor, your father a mill worker in Jefferson, your mother a teacher's aid. You were curious. Showed me how early on you wanted to do well in school. Didn't want the life they had. That's why it was so natural to you once we got it, the struggle I mean. Your parents were better off than us in a lot of ways, but the economic status, I mean. It doesn't matter.

What I mean to say is that you wanted to learn. All your report cards, Jesus, they show a girl and a woman who wanted to do something.

You graduated seventeenth in your class out of two hundred. That's something.

You were in drama, even wanted to be an actress.

You rode horses and though you could never afford one, you were good at it, equestrian champion.

A green thumb, too.

You wanted to believe the world could offer something better, that you could manipulate the shapes around you, that the place could fucking bend the way you wanted, like we all believe when we're young.

You told me once that the boyfriends you had in school never got you. They were too dumb, too young to know what you wanted out of life.

I know you're not listening, but I hope you're at least hearing.

You can't cook worth a shit, but I swear to God every meal you made I've been thankful for.

There were pieces of me that you saw and wanted to put back together. You wanted to get out, wanted to make it all over again.

I made you hard in such a short time. You had to defend your life.

I swear to God Jack's found a way to subtract. That's what he always wanted. He's given you his language.

But we can put it back together, we can add to it, can't we?

There are several things I can't stop thinking of:

How happy you were when you dyed your hair, got the fringe. You were in front of the mirror, running your fingers through your hair.

Making love to you has always been something, never nothing. God, that sounds like an Air Supply song.

It's not like it was, and if I were unhappy it was only because I wanted it to be different. Santa Monica, like you said. That's what I kept thinking about, but I didn't know how to get out of Jack's hands. We're out now, though. Do you believe me? If you'll fucking wake up, get out of this, we're gone. It'll be different.

I know I've gone on and on, but I'm not leaving.

Your mother always said there was something in you that couldn't be broken. I want to believe that now.

You never salted anything you cooked. You wanted children, three of them, you said. We could name them after great figures in history. Churchill, Jesus, Martin Luther, George Washington. I never fixed the bathroom drain. The new one is still in its package on the counter. You don't have to go back there. You'll have a new bathroom. A new apartment. I won't be anywhere around.

Does it make sense for me to reminisce? Do I even deserve a chance to revise the past and give it a different plotline? Jack said that who we are is only made up of our perspective of ourselves, but I don't believe it. I don't believe in God, but I think there's an engine, there's a conductor, there's something essential moving. You've only gone off the tracks, malfunctioned, or you're no longer a passenger on your own train, but it's still there. There's that burning Tracey still there. There's gotta be. We can always come back, even if we can't all the way. I'm going to let you sleep.

Dream, and let your screams rise and be something.

I just want you to open your eyes in the morning, really open them, in recognition of the fuck up I am and how much, regardless of all the fucked-up-ness, that there's a man here who owes you a debt greater than the sum of his parts.

Chapter 14

Rayne was hardly surprised at the turnout the day before. They came in shifts, probably three hundred or more throughout the day, pulling her close, telling her how sorry they were. She was smothered in cloves, Old spice, and moth balls. A few good smelling people, too, thank God—lavender, apricots, and peaches.

Horseshoe Bend Baptist showed up in droves. Even people who hadn't darkened the door of the church in twenty years were there, pushed over the threshold in wheelchairs, or on walkers, or still hobbling on both legs, hunched over and bracing themselves on any rail or piece of furniture they could find. Susan Turner almost fell after the side table she'd propped herself on slid from underneath her.

The convalescent center even made special arrangements to shuttle folks out to the homeplace and back.

Although they could barely move, they could talk. All sorts of stories about her father surfaced. He'd been kicked by horses, cows, donkeys, and any other animal that had legs long enough.

They talked of how he treated his farmhands. Never knew a man as just. *Let ole Thurman take a whole season off with pay after he hurt his back. Who does that?* The crop insurance man was there, Turner Kelly, and talked about the hard summers and winters, the droughts and the floods. Said every time he saw him at Frieda's Diner, Raymond was as happy as a clam. "The Good Lord'll provide, and if he don't, well, he ain't, he'd say." "He had a strong sense of not only being a farmer, but being God's man," she heard someone say behind her. She thought it funny. He went to church, was devoted to it, even gave the ten percent tithe, but religion wasn't personal for him, not like it was for her mother.

"He used to put you on his knee and ride around on the tractor. You remember that?" James Horseley asked her, his oxygen tank at his leg. "We used to think you were gonna work his land, you know. Someone's gotta do it," he said. "Been Hammondtree land for a hundred and fifty years."

Just a quick twist of a knob would shut him up, Rayne thought.

"He was stalwart, Palaver personified," she heard Mrs. Grimes, her old English teacher say.

To Rayne he was a man with dirty hands, muddy boots, a flannel shirt, and Dickies pants.

It was true. He was mostly positive about life, though also quite stubborn, and an "ornery cuss" as her mother liked to call him.

Out on the porch she lit a cigarette. In the yard dozens of cars sat, Buick Towns, Cadillacs, Lincolns. The shuttle bus from the nursing home was parked under the big oak and already covered in leaves. The afternoon sun shone in hard angles off the cars. She sat down in the porch swing, the noise from inside spilling out.

Mary Jo cracked open the door. "You eat?"

"Yes ma'am."

She stepped onto the porch, eased herself into the rocker, and pressed her black blouse over her stomach. "All the people. Heavens. At a time like this you just want to be alone."

"They're just showing support, Mom."

The rocker creaked against the porch. "I wish he could've held on. I knew it was coming, but you just have so much going on. I think it was downright stubborn he did it."

"Mom..."

"For me, too. I knew it, but I wasn't ready. Things ain't like they used to be, you know?"

Rayne stood and knocked ash off the side of the porch into the flowerbed below.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

Mary Jo shook her head. "The good news, and this is what keeps me going, is that there will be a place where Raymond won't need his walker and can swim in the river as long as he wants. That's what I picture heaven like, a Sunday out at the river," she said, her arms in front again, her wrinkled hands palms outward. "Well, where no one almost drowns—you remember that? Heavens, I'm glad Timothy saved that boy--where it's green, everything is still, and it won't change a bit, and we won't feel old. And we can sing "Shall We Gather at the River," and I'll say yes, and Raymond will say yes, and we'll eat fried okra, green beans, mashed potatoes, cornbread, and fried chicken and not have to worry one iota about getting fat, having a heart attack, or cancer."

"Mama—"

"Well, I believe that's where he went, straight on, had his ticket in hand. I'll always remember the sound of the rushing water and the sight of that shiny road or bridge or whatever above me. I lifted my hand to cover my eyes, the wave had gotten so bright. I sat still and just watched it climb higher."

Julie Muse popped her head out the front door. "Mary Jo, what do you want me to do with the ambrosia? There's three Tupperwares full of it."

"Oh, just leave them on the table, Julie," Mary Jo said, turning her head to the door. "I'll probably have some more."

“You think I might could take a little bit home?”

“You shoulda just asked. Have all you want. There’s way too much for the two of us,” Mary Jo said, looking up at Rayne and smiling, then back out to the yard.

Julie nodded and disappeared.

“You need to quit that smoking, honey.”

#

Rayne sits at the kitchen table, the flowers Darrell brought a few days before in front. The edges are brown and dried. Her mother sits at the other side. Neither touches her food. Outside, the willow leaves are strings of yellow. Though the company tired her the day before, and sent her mother to bed before 8 pm, she wished for movement now, the strange smells of age, the rustling about of folks, and the half-truths they told.

“Silas said he’d be by at two,” Mary Jo says.

Rayne pulls at the sleeves of her black blouse and nods.

“Darrell will be there.”

Mary Jo pokes at blackberry cobbler, leftover food from the wake.

“Mama,” Rayne says as she reaches for a flower petal. “Did I let y’all down, you and dad, I mean?”

Mary Jo puts down her fork.

It’s a gavel, a verdict delivered.

The flower petal crumbles between Rayne’s fingers.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Okay, Mama.”

“Gail at the church, you know her, she used to watch you in the nursery. Her boys up and left, all the way to New Orleans. Then Illinois, New York.”

“I know. That’s not what I mean.”

Mary Jo stands and walks to the sink. Her hands grip the edge of the countertop as she stares out the window. “Darling, you need to stop thinking so much.”

#

Ten minutes early, Silas helps Mary Jo out of the house, one arm hooked in hers, the cowboy hat tucked under the other. Rayne follows them out onto the porch. “I’ll be right behind you, Mom.”

Silas helps her into the truck and they pull out of the drive.

Before Rayne the same scene spreads out, but without the cars. She’ll need to rake the leaves.

The yard's so big, she thinks. It'll take hours to pull them together, move them into piles, and stuff them into bags. She can't remember who'd done it before. It wasn't her father. She'd never done it. But it'd always gotten done. How long had it taken? She wonders? Hours, she's sure, maybe days, considering the size of the yard.

Nothing seems as real as the leaves. They're endless. Layers over the driveway and all through the yard up until the clearing gives way to the brush and the woods surrounding the property.

When Darrell parks the Explorer, Rayne, having grabbed the rake from the carport, has already begun, arms reaching and pulling in an unbroken rhythm. This is where she belongs. Her mother will insist they hire someone but it needs to be done, she thinks, and it needs to be done now. Her dress doesn't want to give to her movements. It's too confining. She's pulling it hard at the seams with every stroke at the pile beneath her feet.

"You ready?" Darrell says, climbing out of the Explorer and walking to the tree.

"Already started. There's another rake in the carport. Over by the door."

"I mean for you, you know."

She turns her back to him, keeps raking. "You go on. There's plenty to do here."

Darrell stuffs his hands in his pockets. "I'll be glad to help. It's just there are a lot of people—"

"Don't you see all the fucking leaves?"

"I see them, but—"

"Then don't pretend someone else will do it. Grab a fucking rake or leave."

Darrell stuffs his hands in his pockets and huffs. "Make like a tree and leave?"

Rayne turns and shakes her head. "That's a dumb joke, Darrell." The rake drops to the ground beside the pile she's gathered. Darrell closes in, pulling out his hands from his pockets, and wrapping his arms around her.

#

The crowd is a wall of black, their backs to Timothy. He's parked on the shoulder of the road about fifty yards north of the church and, after dismounting the Ranger, has jumped the ditch and rounded the church. They're in a circle around another minister. No one's invited him, but he'd heard the news on the radio the day before.

This morning he'd pulled from the closet his black suit and left Tracey and Sherman on the floor. He's told Sherman he needs to be resting in the bed, Tracey, too. "You can share the bed," but Sherman shook his head and swatted him away. Besides

taking the water and a little food, just a few morsels of bread the last few days, they're gone, Sherman as much of a zombie as Tracey now.

He inches through the churchyard to the gravesite. His head is down, eyes on his black shoes, scuffed and untied. The leaves sound every step, and when he's close enough, in his periphery, he sees someone turn. He stops twenty feet behind. They begin to sing "It Is Well with My Soul," a hymn he knows was Raymond's favorite.

His recognizes the preacher, one of the previous pastors of Horseshoe Bend, but can't remember his name. He's a fat man, bald, his head too big for his body. After the song, the preacher calls Raymond a patriarch of Palaver, a righteous man, a man of the soil. "And he goes down today as a seed, but he'll rise again in the harvest of the resurrection." A fitting tribute, Timothy thinks.

They pray and the pallbearers lower him into the ground. Rayne's bundling tissue in her hands, as is Mary Jo.

He sees the man with the burns on his head. Tribes. He wants to point, holler, and tell Rayne, but turns.

They disperse, the last song sung, the word of remembrance shared. As he heads back to the truck, someone calls.

"What are you doing?"

He turns back, "I came to say goodbye."

"You're not helping anything. Don't you see?"

Over her shoulder he sees them. Sal, Donny. They're shaking their heads. "I'm just here to pay my respects. And—"

"No, there's no and."

Susannah's before him now, as beautiful as ever in her black dress, her tiny coat, and her hair falling on her shoulders. He hasn't seen her hair down since the night he reached out to her and she drew him in, welcomed him.

"Then why did you come to talk to me?" Timothy says.

"Because I was stupid."

"You wanted to."

"I want to do the things I shouldn't," she says. "Isn't that in the Bible?"

"Yes, but—"

"Shut up."

"I need help. Please listen to me. Sherman and Tracey are on the floor, won't move. Sherman's getting just as sick. Tracey won't come out—"

“You want me to steal some more medicine from the pharmacy?” She turns and walks back toward the crowd.

“Susannah. What’s happened?” He reaches to grab her.

She jerks away, slapping at his hand.

Someone shuffles over, one or two more. “What’s going on? Is everything okay? Who is this? Timothy what are you doing here?” “That’s the flying preacher.” “It’s a disgrace.” “Raymond would’ve never wanted him here.” “Do you know what he’s done?” “No?” “My goodness? And he calls himself a preacher?” “He needs to be covered by the blood.” “Do you want me to steal some more drugs for you?” “Take this box, Timothy. Go and figure some shit out, you know?” “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’m just a corpse, burnt to a crisp, and you lived through it, you lucky motherfucker. Don’t act like you’re ashamed.”

Timothy grabs his ears and doubles over. He pushes through the circle around him, stumbling back to the truck. “He’s crazy.”

“Beelzebub is a funny name. It’s almost as funny as Timothy.”

The leaves crack, every footstep thundering against the earth now. His legs are heavy, like a dream in which you cannot stand and all that matters is standing.

“There will be many coming in the name of the Lord that will not know him. They’ll prophesy and perform miracles. They’ll have an appearance of godliness but deny the power thereof. They’ll come to you in sheep’s clothing, but they’re like wolves. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?”

Before he opens the door, he turns again. Susannah stands twenty feet away, her arms outstretched, her hands beckoning him back. He tries to catch his breath. As he sits in the truck and looks out again, she’s gone. The congregants have gathered around the truck. Then they’re gone. And back again. He turns the ignition and drives through the apparitions. In the rear view he sees nothing, except the steeple disappearing as he rises on the hill and turns.

Chapter 15

Timothy stumbles into the apartment. Around the corner, he finds Sherman and Tracey where he left them.

The voices continue. “You will always be pulling it apart, driving it back into the ground.”

Sherman whispers to Tracey.

“Why are you whispering?” Timothy says. “She can’t hear,” but Sherman doesn’t turn, doesn’t falter, the long chain continuing.

Timothy stands at their feet now and extends his arms above their legs. Sherman’s hair is greasy, the bandage around his calf blood-stained. The room smells of body odour and piss. He needs to change Tracey’s pants again, he knows. She needs to be in the bed, but Sherman won’t allow it.

“In the sheep-pool in Solam, its name in Hebrew is Bedsaida—the lord was found, in the Portico of Solomon the master was found.”

Panic rises as the bells sound from the Methodist church downtown. It’s 3 o’clock.

“He healed the person who was bedridden by means of his word, and he opened the blind man’s eyes. Hence we also, along with the archangels and the bodiless angels shout and call out and say, Holy is God, whom the cherubim praise and the angels revere.”

He knows the lines by heart, though he cannot read the script.

“Holy, mighty is he, whom the chorus of bodiless angels glorifies. Holy, immortal is he, who was revealed in the manger of the dumb animals. Have mercy on us.”

Do I believe? He wonders, his feet rising from the kitchen floor. He’s above them now, his head almost touching the ceiling.

The ceiling fan in the living room beats out of time to the chiming bells.

#

By night Apollo moulded clay and by day he’d set his work out on his booth in the crowded market streets. He sold well most weeks. And when he didn’t he had plenty of friends in the city. Sometimes his friends would ask for specific pieces to be made. The court had even commissioned him for vases.

But though he made a good living, he was gripped by great unhappiness at the sickness of his daughter. He would have given all of his success for her wellness.

On weekends the street magicians populated the city. Some levitated. Some brought out snakes and charmed them to the people’s delight. They played with ropes,

they played flutes, and sounded drums. They sang songs. They had spells for laxatives, for falling in love, for claiming divine powers. The power came from Jesus, they said.

A magician stopped by and lifted a piece of Apollo's pottery in the air. "Ah, this one is nice."

Then he let it go and Apollo's heart shrunk at the thought of it falling, but it was suspended before him, in mid-air.

"You may have any piece you want..."

"What is this?" the magician said.

"If you will tell me how to heal my daughter," Apollo said.

The man laughed. "In whose god do you have faith?"

"I have faith in whosoever god will heal my daughter. A great fever has taken her and she is close to death."

"Do you make these pots, Apollo?"

"By night I make these pots. Vases, too. I have even been commissioned by the royal court."

"Ah, and what god do they serve?"

Apollo looked down from behind his booth.

"I will take this one," the man said, cupping the floating pot in his arm. "And you will go home and write down these words on a vase. It will be a spell for you and your family and will provide protection for your family and healing for your daughter."

"These are the words, dear Apollo: 'He healed the person who was bedridden by means of his word, and he opened the blind man's eyes. Hence we also, along with the archangels and the bodiless angles, shout and call out and say, Holy is god, whom the cherubim praise and the angels revere. Holy, mighty is he, whom the chorus of bodiless angels glorifies. Holy, immortal is he, who was revealed in the manger of the dumb animals. Have mercy on us.'"

He did not know how the man knew his name. "I cannot thank you enough."

"Do not thank me. Be watchful now."

The man bid farewell and disappeared into the street. Maybe he'd really disappeared, Apollo thought.

That evening by torchlight he etched the words in the clay having remembered them by heart, saying them over and over throughout the day.

"Come to bed, dear Apollo, for you must be up early to set up," his wife, Elpis, said in the doorway.

“Yes, my love. But tonight I have made a vase which will heal our daughter and protect us from evil spirits.”

“We shall keep the vase in the house and we shall recite its words in the morning, in the middle of day, and in the evening. We shall sleep with the words sounding in our ears, and by the third day her fever will break. We shall clasp hands and lift prayers around our table for her, our dear Adonia. Our road has been long, and will be longer still, but these words we shall lift will rise to god and will be pleasing to him. In turn, he will grant us power and protection and will purge the demon of illness from her blood.”

Over the next few days, Apollo busied himself in his work, moulding and painting each earthen vessel as he had before, but at each meal, the family clasped hands and prayed for Adonia’s healing. He sold well in the streets as always. Business was good, and he was grateful to God for the blessings bestowed upon him.

On the morning of the fourth day, Adonia awoke and dashed into the room where her family clasped hands and prayed.

“Oh, dear Adonia,” her father said, and brought her close to his side. “We must be thankful to our good God, the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, who has brought her back to life. And thankful to Jesus.”

The family wept and held her close. They sang hymns and passed around the vase. Apollo had never felt so thankful.

But when he opened the door on his journey to the market, he found smoke rising to the sky. The city was in ruins. While they slept, not a sound crept into the house. No smoke seeped in through the windows or the cracks at the door.

“Oh, God, what has happened?” Apollo cried out. “What have we done? Gather your things children, Wife. We must leave this place because it has become ash.”

Exiled from home, Apollo took one donkey and placed the Elpis and Adonia on it and led them through the ruins and into the desert. His son, Aster, walked at his side.

“Where will we find water?” Elpis asked.

“Where there are springs we shall drink,” Apollo said.

And it came to pass that Apollo grew tired and thirsty and hungry. He grew pale and sun-scorched as they trekked across the sands. When he had found food, he had given it to Adonia, to Aster, and to Elpis. When he had found water, he let them drink first, and they stored the rest in skins. When days had passed between springs, they would turn up the skins, Elpis, Adonia and Aster, and Apollo, lastly, would turn up the skins and let only the tiniest drops fall against his tongue. Forty days passed and they were no closer to a city.

“Maybe we have gone in the wrong direction,” Elpis said.

“I follow the stars,” Apollo said.

But the constellations shifted in the sky, it seemed to Apollo. He could not explain this mystery. The sun did not rise as it should. It was misplaced in the sky. The wind burned their skin. The heat scorched them. The sand blew into their eyes. One day, weary from plodding across the dunes, they sat beneath a palm.

“I prayed for a miracle, dear family, and God has provided, but I fear my days are numbered. This has become a curse to us,” Apollo said, lifting the vase. “I shall break it now so that our fate will befall no one else.”

“You mustn’t, my love,” Elpis said, reaching out to stop him.

But it was too late. He had shattered the vase against the palm tree.

That evening the desert grew cold, and they huddled together under a shawl Elpis had knitted.

Adonia fell sick. She coughed and her eyes bled. Elpis pulled her close and cursed Apollo for what he had done.

Only Aster lived through the night. The sand blew across the body of his family and the sun burned their skin. In the morning, he wept and gathered all he could take. He saddled the donkey. He would find Cairo if it took him half his life. Before he left, he saw the fragment of the vase and picked it from the sand and put it in his satchel.

#

“Holy, immortal is he, who was revealed in the manger of the dumb animals. Have mercy on us,” Timothy says into the kitchen.

The blue digits on the microwave change, the tick of a wristwatch in the other room beats small ticks, a dripping faucet sounds. Timothy does not know that he has prayed through the day. Darkness falls outside his apartment. His voice, wearied and gravelly, repeats the lines.

“Timothy, stop,” someone says.

Is it Ferrell? Susannah? Is it Adonia? Aster, finally arriving in Cairo, having no need for protection?

“The fuck you doing?” Sherman says, shaking his shoulders.

Timothy sits now in the chair, his head in his hands.

Tracey stands in the corner, hugging herself. It’s evening.

“What happened?” Timothy says.

“Tracey’s awake,” Sherman says, hobbling over to the wall and bracing himself.

“I’m awake,” Tracey says.

“How do you feel?” Timothy says, using the backs of his hands to rub his eyes.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I just ate a banana. You need to buy some groceries.” She half laughs.

He can see only her shadow. The kitchen light is off. The ceiling fan ticks in the other room.

“I need a shower,” she says.

“I’ve washed your clothes. They’re in the chair in the living room,” Timothy says.

“I kind of like these pants,” she says, walking toward him, holding the sides up in fists.

Timothy looks up as she passes, but she doesn’t return his glance, disappearing around the corner to grab the clothes. She passes again on her way to the bathroom. The water from the shower head patters against the tub.

“How is she?”

“She’s back,” Sherman says.

“What now?”

Sherman stumbles to the chair beside him and plops down.

“You’re going to take me to the train depot.”

“What?”

“Probably not safe for me to drive. I don’t have another way.”

“What about Tracey?”

“She told me to get the fuck away. After I untied her, we stood, and she pushed me right over while you were praying.”

Timothy’s fingers interlock. “She’s just not thinking straight.”

“She’s thinking straighter than she can shoot.”

“Where will you go?”

The shower curtain rustles and the water stops in the bathroom.

“East first. Then I don’t know. Listen, I’m sorry about—”

“Did I heal your leg?”

“What?”

“Your leg. Is it healed?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Tracey, she’s better. I’ve been praying.”

Sherman sighs and leans back in his chair. “Still hurts like hell.”

“You’ll take the medicine?”

Tracey's out of the bathroom and standing before them, a towel wrapped around. Her blond roots peek out under the layers of black wet hair. The circles around her eyes suggest though she's been in and out of consciousness but her skin has color. "You're not gone?" she snaps.

"Tracey, listen," Sherman says.

"It's better if you're gone when I tell the cops," she says.

"You heard her, kid," Sherman says, standing, one hand on the table to prop himself up.

"Can you even walk?" Timothy says.

"Well enough," he says, now limping into the living room. "One hug?"

"Fuck off," Tracey says, pushing him. He falls against the wall. Timothy rises to catch him.

"Come on," Sherman says, pushing him away and hopping into the living room, arms out at his side as if walking a tightrope through the maze of books.

Timothy swipes the meds from the table, pockets them, and darts to Sherman.

"Here," Timothy says, wrapping one of Sherman's arms around his neck. Timothy opens the door. They walk like this down the steps, each step careful, measured, through the foyer, out onto the porch, and into the parking lot. The night is clear and cold, and their breath is fog before them. Timothy throws open the door, helps Sherman in, and rounds the truck.

When Timothy opens the driver's-side door, "So that's it?"

"What else is there to say? I love her, goddamit, but it took too long to say it."

"Can't you now?"

"I don't want to climb the stairs again."

Timothy gets in and puts the key in the ignition and grips the steering wheel. *It's too soon.*

"Don't you get it, kid? Don't you see when things are just fucked?" Sherman's swinging his arms around the cab. "Sometimes you can't fix them. I know you believe in grace and forgiveness, blah, blah, but listen, there are some places you can't come back from. Sometimes the train only goes one way, okay?" He's pointing his finger at the windshield.

Timothy turns the engine, and they pull out of the parking lot, beeps sounding on the dash to remind Sherman to buckle his seatbelt.

#

Sherman cracks open the window and breathes in the cold. Timothy leans over to turn on the heat.

“Got a cigarette?”

Timothy doesn’t answer. The headlights swing right onto highway 27.

“What are you going to do?”

“I got a Ph.D.”

“And a record.”

“Academics get second chances. We’re prone to misconduct.” He laughs.

“The drugs, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t have drug record, kid. And won’t after this. Whatever Vision is, it’s legal. They haven’t classified it. As far as the killing and shit, I had no idea that was going on. Tracey’ll tell them the truth. I saved her.”

“You think you’re a hero?”

“Don’t get sentimental.”

Timothy parks the Ranger at the north side of the depot, the building now between them and the tracks. He leaves the engine running.

“Let’s see. I got twenty minutes. Maybe I can find the stub of a joint I threw down here. Sure there are plenty.”

Condensation covers the windshield. Timothy reaches out, uses his forearm to clear it.

Sherman opens the door, and Timothy reaches to turn off the truck.

“Don’t worry. I can take it from here,” Sherman says.

“It’s called train hopping. You can’t even walk.”

“I’m resourceful.”

Timothy’s headlights shine on the ruins of the depot. Sherman hops out.

“Wait,” Timothy says, leaning over, the pills in his hand. “You’ll need these.”

Sherman grabs the pills, nods, and limps his way to the side of the building, leans against it, and waves Timothy on. The truck backs into the road and stops.

Timothy pops his head out the window. Over the roar of the truck, he hollers out, “From one desperate man to another, good luck.”

Sherman nods, one hand at his eyes.

The truck turns and heads south, disappearing around the other side of the depot.

Forgiveness, he thinks, has long been lost on him. Maybe it just means forgetting. If Tracey can love enough to forget him, he’ll be thankful. One hand against the building keeps him upright. His feet crunch weeds lining the brick wall.

Four tracks converge from the west, and one splits off, now defunct. He walks to a lone car on the track, a grainer, and perches on the side, just next to the ladder.

When you decide to catch a train, he thinks, and you've read your share of the Beats, you know you're a big fucking cliché. But maybe, safe inside that cliché, you become something bigger than yourself.

And then it doesn't matter, goddamit, because there's the hum of the engine, the click of pistons, the rumble under your body, and possibility approaching you from that long trek.

The train slows, and you're hiding your face, your whole body, unable to see, but knowing it's kicking the car on the end, and reversing to attach itself to you. There's someone yelling, and then you're pulling off, a part of the machinery, safe inside.

He leans against the ladder and is out of Palaver proper in five minutes, the city lights giving way to the darkness of the countryside. He's forgotten his coat, still folded at the foot of Timothy's bed. *One crazy motherfucker*. He hugs himself and imagines alternate narratives, the voices of the oppressed, colonized, possibilities yet unexplored, routes he could've taken, snags he could've avoided, but they all lead here, he knows, with him bundled up, broken, and headed out of town.

Chapter 16

Timothy winds through the cramped parking deck, the Ranger revving at each incline, up to the ramp to the second level, then the third, and fourth, but there are no spaces. He circles around and coasts down the ramps back to the first floor, at the bottom telling the attendant it's full, handing back his ticket. She nods and flips a switch. Taking a turn back onto the road, he finds a line of cars spilling out onto the shoulder. The clock on the dash reads 1:15. On the side of the road, behind a Chevy Malibu, he puts the truck in park and hops out.

The train howls in the distance. He's walking now, eyes straight ahead. He's walked too long into the ground he thinks. The light from the hospital pours through the two-story windows at the front of the building. A sign on the curb reads "Chest Pain," an arrow pointing down the lane toward the ER.

He cannot count the number of deathbeds beside which he's lifted prayers and the small hands he's taken into his during the final hours of people's lives, both young and old.

That was before, he thinks.

In the back of his pants he's tucked Sherman's Colt. It was cold, heavy, dense, when he lifted it at the apartment.

Maybe he's still a soldier.

Maybe Sherman was right—this is everything he believes played out.

He knows with all of the knots binding him, this is the only way out. He steps onto the curb in front of the building. A man throws down a cigarette outside the revolving doors. He nods. Timothy returns it.

"Gettin' cold, huh?" the man says.

"You wouldn't believe."

"Good evening," the woman at reception says as he enters the building. The lobby is full of faux leather armchairs, coffee tables, and out-of-date magazines scattered on the tables and in the seats.

Past the elevators, he takes a right and marches between what seems an endless hall of doors. Numbers, and sometimes names, are affixed to the wall beside them. Joey Hays took his last breath in 105. Martha Grimes in 107. At the corner he turns to the left and the hall opens into another atrium. A nurse is perched on a stool at reception. To the right a set of yellow double doors. A panel on the side. Above the doors a sign reads "Psychiatric Unit."

Timothy glances up at the words, and to the nurse.

“Can I help you?”

“I need to get in.”

She’s heavysset with blond curls. Her scrubs are a sampling of the Serengeti, elephants, giraffes, and tigers.

“You’ll need to sign in here...”

Timothy walks to the desk and picks up the pen.

“And list your relation to the patient.”

“I’m not related to anyone.”

“Why do you want to get in?”

Timothy leans over the desk. “I want to see the kids who took Vision.”

She turns her head. Her lips are open. She’s a mouth breather. She laughs. “I don’t understand.”

“I want to give them life.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are they alive?”

“I can’t say anything to you about their state of mind.”

“Do they breathe like you?”

She bites her lip and reaches for the phone.

“No, please. I’m here to pray is all, to heal. You must recognize me.”

“You’re a faith healer?”

“If that’s what you call it,” he says.

She giggles and puts her hands on the counter, pushing her stool out from behind the desk and standing. “If you’re a miracle worker, you can open the doors, can’t you?”

Timothy looks away. “Don’t make fun.”

“I’m the joke here.”

Timothy turns to the doors.

“Go ahead.”

Timothy closes his eyes and reaches out his arms. The woman takes her cell phone and snaps a photo of him.

“You know who you look like?” she says, but Timothy doesn’t respond. “You look like Luke Skywalker. You know who that is? Are you a Jedi?” She doubles over in laughter.

The doors swing open and a nurse in pink comes out. The woman laughing stands upright and gasps for breath. “No, no, no,” the nurse says.

“I got medicine in 170,” almost shouldering Timothy as she walks by. “What’s your problem?” She opens the tiny doors of the reception area and scoots inside. “Almost bit my fingers off.”

Timothy slides between the doors before they shut.

Behind him the heavyset nurse shouts, “That’s not what I meant.”

Between the doors he walks, surveying the names. Halfway down he sees “Skylar Smith” and pushes open the door. Inside, beeps from machinery rise to meet him. The room is dark, illuminated only by an outside streetlamp through the open blinds. Skylar’s got an IV in her arm. Her dark hair falls in waves across the pillow. At the window Timothy peers out onto the courtyard. Someone’s smoking a cigarette. He pulls the blinds shut.

He turns and lifts his arms. He prays, invoking the Holy Name, the manger of dumb animals. He lifts his voice. It’s rising now. It’s easier, the words no longer sticking in his throat. He doesn’t yawn or fumble over the words.

It might take him all night, he knows. He’ll stay until the awakening. He must.

“Let’s go, buddy,” a voice says from the door.

It’s a stocky man in a security outfit, one hand on a gun at his side.

“That wasn’t the deal,” Timothy says without opening his eyes. “I opened the doors.”

His concentration breaks, and he opens his eyes. The officer is a thick silhouette at the doorway. He inches into the room, one hand hovering over a gun at his hip. “You can’t be in here.”

Timothy can reach behind for the gun, draw faster, and shoot the man between his eyes. He’s better trained, he knows. The man will bleed out onto the floor, and he can continue his prayer. He reaches, fingers wrapping around the grip of the gun, cold in his hand.

“Keep your hands where I can see ‘em.”

“You don’t know what’s at stake,” Timothy says, releasing the gun and placing his hands in the air.

“Your ass in jail is what’s at stake,” the officer says.

“This is holy.”

The officer looks down at Skylar, back at Timothy. “What’s holy?”

“You don’t see it?”

“There’s no helping her, kid. None of them.”

“Why can’t people pray for them?”

“People been praying all over the city.”

“You see this?” Timothy says, taking off his jacket, dropping it, and holding out his arms. “You see it?”

The man keeps his eyes on Timothy but edges to the light switch and flips it. “You got a lot of words,” he says.

“They’re not just words. They’re a story.”

“This is all well and good, Benny Hinn, but you gotta leave.”

Timothy half closes his eyes and says the words, his arms out in front, his jacket at his feet.

The officer inches closer while Timothy prays and Skylar’s monitor beeps in an unbroken rhythm.

Before the security officer reaches him, Timothy charges and kicks the man’s leg out from under him. The man jerks forward, his head barely missing the wood panel foot of Skylar’s bed. Timothy falls to his knees and brings the man’s arm behind him.

“You don’t know who’s sent me,” he says, prying the gun, a Detective Special, from the officer’s hand. He opens the chamber, but it’s empty. The man groans. “I think you broke my leg, you fucking idiot. You’re right where you belong.”

“A kingdom divided against itself will not stand,” Timothy says as the gun clanks against the tile floor. On his knees, he slides to his jacket, snags it, and stands. *There’s not enough time.*

He steps over the squirming officer and walks through the doorway. At the end of the hall he presses the panel and the yellow doors open. Behind him the man yells “Help.”

“What you do to Ebby?” the fat woman says to the air, her curls shaking as she looks back and forth and picks up the phone.

Timothy walks through the atrium, back through the hallway, and into the front waiting room. A call falls from the intercom, a number, “code 1405,” and he’s out in the night before the message’s finished.

#

“Don’t go,” he says as he opens the door to the apartment. “Tracey?”

He rounds the corner to the kitchen and flips on the light. Doubling back and into the hallway, “Tracey, don’t tell them yet.” The bathroom door is open. Puddles of water cover the floor. Her towel lies crumpled on the bath mat by the tub. “Tracey?” Once across the hall he flips on the bedroom light. She’s gone.

He walks to the end of the bed and sits, clasps his hands.

He lifts the phone receiver and dials Susannah's number. *What will he say?*

Sherman is right.

He hangs up before she answers.

Again he picks up the phone to dial Silas but slams down the receiver before he's finished. His hands shake. He pulls the gun from his pants, empties the chamber, and throws it across the room. Sweat and illness fill his nostrils.

He stands and inspects the bed, pulling off the comforter and the bloodstained sheets, wadding them in his arms and throwing them on the floor. He does the same with the pillowcases until a tall pile of laundry is at his feet.

Draped over the footboard is Sherman's coat. He leans over and pulls it to him. He searches through the pockets until he finds the Ziploc bag. In it is the tiny black pill.

He thumbs it out and takes it between his fingers. A tiny ball of light, a reflection from above, glimmers on the pill. One hand doesn't know what the other does.

Hand to mouth, he's sweating blood, he knows. Finger in his mouth. He opens himself to it, feels its mass under his tongue and then in his cheek, at the roof of his mouth, until he swallows. He stands and lifts his arm out from his sides.

#

A statue. The ceiling fan knocks. Noise from Ms. Grant below. His body as stationary as the building itself. His body frozen. His body nothing but volume, energy moving atoms into a palpable mass at the side of his bed. He sees, and he hears, but through no filters. His consciousness gives way, the fire once burning now fading until there are only embers, and a thin line of smoke, and nothing. Extinguished.

How can one represent nothing? How can one peer into the mind of one who sees but does not understand, who hears but does not listen, who feels but cannot code the sensations?

But what is this? These are his thoughts, he realizes, as a finger twitches. It's his index finger, and it's moving frantically, as if tapping, as if composing a telegram, sending Morse Code, scratching paint off a wall, or a scab from flesh. Another finger follows, moving in opposite time, syncopated, until his index and middle finger are dancing, down and up beats. The other fingers follow, the fingers that placed the pill in his mouth. He's balling up a fist, clenching and relaxing, grabbing air. His elbow bends and his arm falls to his side. The shoulder of the arm rolls in its joint, and his foot. A pulse through his groin, his pelvis, his thighs, and he's shaking his leg. He throws his head back and opens his mouth as if for the first time, sucking in air. In circles now he moves his head. Lifting the arm again, he stretches outward and steps forward with his

animate foot but stumbles, the other not yet awake. He falls and hits his head against the jamb of the doorway, his cheek against the floor. A line of blood trickles down the side of his face. He winces, tries to push himself up with the good arm. The other side is moving now.

There is a shadow's shadow where once only a shadow. Susannah laughs. She was always beautiful. The sound of tires on gravel. Both arms push himself up from the floor. Gun shots ring out. Just a tiny black pill. Sherman mumbles, but he cannot distinguish one word from another. The truck veers off the road. His hands pale under the incandescent bulb. The long lines of the spell unfold before him. He braces himself against the door. Steady now, he walks into the living room.

In the metal chair against the wall Susannah sits naked, her dark nipples lit by the fixtures on the ceiling fan, her hair falling on her shoulders. She's combing it and shaking her head. Timothy crouches in front of her and reaches out to touch, but she recoils, spits.

On the other side of the room Tracey lies naked and lifeless. He crawls to her, rubbing between her thighs with a rag he's grabbed from the air, but she doesn't dry. The stench of piss permeates the room. He lies beside her, thinking he can push himself through the floor.

The Little Nee Nee gurgles, bubbles on the surface, red circles forming as it rains, rains blood. The river rises, swells, the current grows swift, then floods.

Trees drip blood. The water rises above the banks. It isn't just a river now but a wave, rushing over the landscape, southward, rushing over Timothy's apartment building, first floor, spilling into the windows and doorways, blood filling up Ms. Grant's lungs. Her dead body floats now, back pressed against the stippling, arms adrift in the river.

The waves uproot the trees, and then Horseshoe Bend Baptist, its white walls collapsing upon impact. His truck is now awash in its massive arm, bobbling and flipping, everything converging here.

The wire factory, the buildings on the square, the railroad depot all swallowed and swept from their foundations. The train coming into town blows its whistle, and then is underwater, thousands of tons of steel hurled off the track and submerged. All of them are here now, swimming in the last moments, trying to rise to the surface to breathe, swimming without hands and feet.

He lies on his back, eyes closed, fists clenched. He doesn't deserve to move. He'll lie and drown. The blood rises, halfway filling up the room.

This has been pouring here for longer than anyone can remember," he says.

"They're dead. They're all already dead," he says. Then Susannah, Tracey, and he float,

too, carried upward to the ceiling by sludge. His books are now thrown about in slow motion.

The river rises again, taking him closer to the ceiling, his nose almost touching it. He sucks in a breath and swims to the window where he kicks open the glass somehow and swims to the truck somehow and climbs in it somehow as it circles in the flood somehow.

He has to leave them behind, he thinks. They're already dead. He takes the river with him. As he drives and dives deeper, the river falls, drains, into where, he doesn't know, not the ground. The skeletons of buildings emerge from the flood. The Ranger revving up, pulling out of the parking lot. The blood river sinks lower and lower until he's on the tarmac of Highway 27. The white lines of the roadway are now visible. Lines of people he's known are scattered about.

Beside him, holding the axe, is Waller. "I thought you died in the flood," he says to Timothy. "You can't kill me," he says.

"We have to let some more darkness in here," he says. Waller grabs Timothy's hand and tries to pry it off the steering wheel, but it doesn't budge. Waller opens the door and throws himself out. "No one says that the end's not coming," Timothy yells. "The end is a spark. The end is a river. The end is the cry in an empty house. The end is a motor gurgling water. The end is a hand on the ground. The end is..." Timothy says, jerking upright, the Ranger parked on the square, his lights shining on a crowd of people on the sidewalk.

The Gospel According to No One

My servant and I, on the night we buried the body of the learned man, walked through the dusk on that humid Sunday, smell of honeysuckle thick in the air, and I toppled over, my foot having gotten twisted on the root of an oak. I startled a rattlesnake, and it slid from beneath a stone and that holy beast struck me and gave me the knowledge from which y'all been hiding from ever since you were naked and ashamed. My servant knelt over me, and sucked the wound on my leg, spat onto the ground, and sucked more, like a babe at the tit of justice, I tell you. He must've swallowed some for when he was done he leaned against the oak and his head fell back. I lay on my back turned toward him for hours. His eyes stayed open wide, and it looked like he was taking in the great beauty of nightfall. He didn't speak, or move, until first light and when he came to, he said he reckoned he wanted to die because there wasn't much of anything left to live for. So it was fulfilled, "And I will put enmity between the snake and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." I saw then there was a way to righteousness, a way to truth, for your evil city, oh Sodom and Gomorrah, who've turned against the natural for the unnatural. You have traded in your crown of jewels for the crown of thorns, y'all have crucified yourself already, already dead in your sins, and I have come upon y'all, I have risen against you, I have taken the winnowing fan to the wheats and tares of your harvests, your concrete Hinnom.

Chapter 17

Somewhere under the cover the phone rings. Rayne's upright, wrestling the comforter, until she pulls the phone out the fold, fumbles with it, and slides her finger across to answer. "Yeah?"

"Rayne...it's Darrell. This is the worst timing—"

"What is it?"

"We got someone here at the station. Tracey Maddox."

"Sherman's girl?"

"She's saying some crazy stuff."

Rayne pinches the bridge of her nose and wipes her eyes. "I'm coming in."

"No, you don't—"

But she's already hung up and put her feet on the floor. She's in her room at the Hammondtree place. She walks to the dresser, pulls out her clothes, and throws them against the bed. It is the worst timing. She's slept only an hour or two, staying up until past eleven with Mary Jo downstairs.

There are dishes to be washed. And then there's the matter of the leaves.

#

Tracey's in the interrogation room, sitting in a chair against the wall, arms crossed over her chest. Darrell's at the table, one hand hovering over an ash tray, a half-smoked cigarette burning between his fingers. Darrell nods to Rayne.

"Tracey," Rayne says.

"I know it's insane," Tracey says as Rayne sits on the edge of the table.

"She's been telling us that the preacher we talked to, that Jack Tribes, is behind Vision."

"What?" Rayne says.

"I was there, out at his church. They gave me that shit."

"Then why aren't you a fucking zombie like everyone else?" Rayne says.

"I don't know. I just woke up. And Timothy and Sherman were there."

Rayne looks at Darrell, who's shaking his head, and back at Tracey. "Sherman's alive?"

Tracey nods.

"Where is he now?"

"I dunno. He left."

"Who's Timothy?"

"Don't know much about him. He's a preacher."

“The levitating preacher?”

“Never saw him do it,” Tracey says.

“I did,” Rayne says. “How long were you there?”

“Days are kind of mixed up in my mind right now,” Tracey says.

“Do you remember anything else?”

“It’s a barn. There were some other kids. When I was on Vision, I wasn’t thinking. Don’t have any memories of it, but when I was awake, and I was myself again, at least sort of myself, I can remember a little. Ten others maybe? They were moaning. Scared the fuck out of me, but what was I going to do? They had me tied up.”

“I’m finding it hard to believe that that old man, who I could punch with a finger and knock to the ground, could heft these boys up on the rafters, even use an axe.”

“An axe?” Tracey says.

“For the murders.”

“What murders?”

“Three dealers.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tracey says, her head lowered.

“Must’ve been him,” Tracey says, head up quickly and pointing to the wall at the photograph of The Whistler. “Waller. Sherman had been talking to him for a while. He came over, almost killed us. He’s the one who took me. I think he’d forced Sherman into dealing it.”

“The Whistler’s working with Tribes?”

“Who’s The Whistler?”

“Waller, I mean,” Rayne says.

“Jack’s the boss, at least that’s what Sherman was always saying.”

#

Timothy raises both hands in the air and looks up at the street light. He’s standing on the hood of the Ranger.

“When I was a boy I knew a boy who wanted to be a man. His name was Mr. Bojangles. And he was nice enough to dance for you. As long as the song was right. He had a very particular taste for songs, I swear.

“You better hide folks. I’m just trying to make you laugh one time. I’m no comedian, but y’all need to find a way to laugh, at least in the next few minutes ‘cause what’s about to happen to you you ain’t never seen the likes before.”

“Go home!” someone hollers.

“What you don’t know is the river’s rising. Y’all never seen it rise like this before. What river? What do you mean what river? You don’t know there’s a river here? It’s a cesspool you say? All kinds of shit living in it? Well, there’s all kinds of shit living in you, too. Now don’t get offended. Why’s people always so broken up when someone tries to tell them they got shit for blood? Don’t want to hear the truth? What do you mean have I got an answer? I done told you what’s about to happen. Don’t that mean a goddamn thing? Isn’t that the answer? Go back in and drink your beers, pour them back, laugh with your stupid fucking friends ‘cause no one’s going to save you from the goddamn river.”

“You’re talking to yourself,” someone says.

“Yeah, you’re right about that. I’m the preacher. Don’t you respect the preacher? Don’t you heed warnings? Oh, no. I forgot. This here’s a university town. And in a university town you’d rather me talk about the insufficiency of language, huh?

“You’d rather point out the symbols, huh? Illuminate the thematic strands of your texts.

“To tell you what it means to be human? So that you can understand some other asshole’s way of saying that none of it makes any goddamn sense?

“Well, I concur, but I’m very well sick of the stories and I’d rather be in the bar with the rest of you throwing ‘em back because it’s true and when it’s all said and done, there’s nothing but the river, you see? Don’t y’all know anything? Is this not making any sense to you? Would it be easier if I used your systematic theologies? You too ignorant to hear what I’m saying? Stop gathering around.

“I had a friend fried to hell because of a jihadist.

“Here’s you some thoughtful religion. A speck of darkness, imputed to you by the sins of your father and mother.

“I had to clean her between the legs.

“You open your mouth to language, understanding, recognize proclivities—you like that word? Is that polysyllabic enough--to unrighteousness, lean in to the call, and this is the first lie that the speck births.

“The speck a mote a plank and people know there’s something fucked. Here’s a paradox. Created in the image of the one above all but only in part. Coursing through our veins is vile, insipid Otherness, contemptuous iniquity, swallowing the whole man, all of me, all of me, and all of you. Both image of God and Satan, whores for righteousness and the beast. I had a friend who liked trains and he got shot through.

“What an asshole,” someone cries out.

“Don’t throw shit up here. It’s in me, too, don’t you see?” he shouts back.

He feels the sweat running down his cheeks. He stomps his foot on the truck.

“Here’s a mystery and if you don’t believe it, I don’t believe it. I was covered by the blood, sanctified, cleansed, a new creation. A tiny infant in swaddling clothes reaching out to the world. But the blood carries the speck, plank, and mote. Grows tenfold in my body, y’all. The being born again only makes you aware of it. It don’t take it away, don’t cleanse you. My friend used to lie beside the girl who wet herself and he’d sing through the night sometimes. He’d sing I was strong as I could be. He’d sing “Night Moves.” And he’d hum every time the train came through.

“The only way to the gospel is to never hear it, to never despair of demons swimming in blood. If you have ears, hear that you shouldn’t hear anything, that you should be blind to trespasses, for once you come into understanding, you come into relentless condemnation though you are contrite and broken.

“I’ll never be your beast of burden. Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty girl.

“That’s funny, ain’t it? I didn’t climb on this truck tonight to tell you salvation. I came to say don’t listen to me. I shouldn’t even be up here at all because you know what? It don’t matter none. It’s done too late. Go back inside.”

“Look at him!” one of them yells. “He can’t even make up his mind.”

They pound the hood of the Ranger with fists.

“There was a boy in Egypt carrying a piece of a vase into Cairo. And you know what happened to him? Someone slit his throat and sucked his blood out of his neck. They left the piece on the ground, never thought of it again. I thought it was something. I had me a story I was telling. It came down centuries, put in my hands, for such a times as this. I even put it here on my arms. See?” Timothy says, pulling back his suit jacket sleeve.

Someone throws a bottle, cracking his windshield. The bottle rolls off the truck and shatters against the pavement.

“Underneath it ain’t nothing. I told you to go back inside. Why am I still talking if you’re not supposed to listen? It’s just noise.”

“Get a fucking life,” someone shouts.

“You don’t need to worry none. You don’t do nothing. You’re okay. It’s going to be all right. You feel better now? Don’t worry none. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

“No, there is a way! There must be a way!” he hollers.

“Fuck Jesus! And church!” someone shouts and laughs.

Timothy points to the sky, to their faces, to himself. “Paul was right when he said that we know only in part, only prophesy in part, and in this part we are always failing, always falling.”

One of the boys grabs Timothy’s leg, and Timothy kicks him in the face. The boy falls backward onto the curb, grabbing his nose. His friends huddle over him, and Timothy crouches down and peers down from the truck. “You see where the darkness got me? You see what it’s done to me? It’s festered, and I’m trying.”

The kid on the curb holding his nose cries out. “He’s crazy!”

Two jump the hood. Timothy stands and points his arms to the air. One knees Timothy between the legs. Timothy hunches over and the other one punches him in the back of the head. Timothy falls to his knees and they jump down and pull him off the hood, one grabbing his arms, the other his ankles. They drop him with a thud on the sidewalk and take turns kicking him. Timothy grunts at each blow.

“Somebody help!” someone screams. The crowd thickens around Timothy.

Sirens blare, and blue lights light up the square, reflecting in the storefront windows, and the boys clear out, rounding the corners and heading behind the buildings. But the cops don’t stop for them. Beelining through the square, toward the police station. Timothy reaches for his face, sees his palm covered in blood. He groans and holds his side, the sirens loud in his ears. The crowd disperses, no one offering Timothy a hand, only laughter trailing around the buildings.

Chapter 18

It was supposed to be simple. The lead investigator for the G.B.I. went out to inspect Tracey's claims. He went with backup, but when they arrived, Waller had rounded up the kids and was holding a gun at them as he herded them into the back of the church.

Rayne stands in the lounge, yelling at Chief Richardson. "Cliff's in there, Chief. I don't have a choice."

"I'm not giving you a choice," Chief Richardson says. "I can't talk about this now."

"Rayne, come on, sit down," Darrell says.

"This place, this fucking hell hole of a place," she says.

"You're not in your right mind, Rayne," Chief says and storms out.

Darrell's hands are on her shoulders. Her head's lowered now. "You gotta think straight. Go on home, Rayne. Go back to bed. I shouldn't have called."

Japheth comes in and nods at Rayne. "You okay?" he asks. He's suited in a bullet-proof vest, horn-rimmed glasses atop his head. But he doesn't wait for an answer, zipping through the other door.

The station buzzes. Officers from the G.B.I. and the local police look more like soldiers now in their green fatigues and helmets, strapped in webs of holsters. They move in and out, the sound of boots on the tile, the sounds of magazines locking into place.

Darrell leans over to hug her. "I'll get him," he says.

Rayne pulls away, purses her lips, and leans against the wall next to the water cooler.

There's no way to count them all, maybe thirty, or fifty, carrying MP5s and Commando Colts.

She walks outside as they pile into armoured vans in the darkness of the parking lot.

Engines rev and they peel out followed by an entourage of patrol and local squad cars, blue lights illuminating the city.

Rayne sits in the Impala, looking in the rear view and back at the Glock she's laid on the passenger's seat. She picks it up, turns it, the streetlamp above the car reflecting off its surface. Love and duty, both giant inside her, converge in the metal instrument.

She leaves the station, following their trail but turns off 113 and heads toward The Hammondtree place.

The media will swarm them soon, parking down the lengths of the long gravel drive, hollering into microphones, at cameras, journalists in wire-rimmed glasses scribbling into notebooks.

#

One hand clutches the steering wheel, the other a handkerchief at his nose, speedometer quivering at eighty miles an hour, dropping only when he anticipates bends ahead. The transmission coughs and wails at each straightaway. Oncoming traffic flashing lights doesn't slow him down. His high beams are on, two candles in a cathedral.

He spins the wheel at Hickory Level Road, a sharp right, and winds through twisting kudzu'd shoulders until a left sends him on a mile-long stretch of asphalt.

After another right, the tarmac ends. The gravel spits and growls at the undercarriage. His hand wrestles the wheel, each hole on the path jolting him off track.

Stepping on the brake he swings left into the brush. The uneven ground jars the truck as he navigates between the almost skeletal trees. He kicks the brake and the tires lock. The truck slides until the front end hovers over the water.

The water is glass in the moonlight. He can walk across it.

He cuts the lights.

He hits the latch and throws out one leg and the other until he's standing on the bank and falling backwards against the door to shut it. His breath is vapor, the handkerchief still pinched and folded around his nose.

The little boy, Damian, was here, he thinks, squatting down at the tree, its branches a mangled hand dipping into the current. For what? What does it hope to lift from the tumult?

He doesn't yet feel the bruises on his body.

#

Rayne jerks the wheel, tires screeching on the tarmac. She swerves right and heads north, away from home, towards the crew.

She turns onto J Bar and throws gravel behind down the long drive. A line of squad cars, fire trucks, and ambulances are parked at the end. She turns on her blue light and passes them, and taking another right, heads toward the church. Out in the clearing she swings behind the scene.

The churchyard glows with the phosphorescence of emergency vehicles. They've formed two semicircles around the church, the one closest to the church with armored cars, the patrol and local forces in the back.

She parks behind the second circle and throws open the car door, grabs the gun, crouches, and eases through the field to Darrell's car. He's squatting behind his open door, his Glock 22 in hand. They're about fifty feet from the church.

"No, Rayne," he says. The ambient light reveals his sweaty forehead. "Go back. This ain't your fight anymore. You don't even have a vest," he says.

"I'll be all right back here."

He shakes his head.

The church hasn't changed, she knows, but the gabled roof, the towers on either side, and the odd shape of the building are imposing now.

The megaphone crackles in the distance. "We know... hostages inside... willing to work... But...tell us what you want."

"Rayne? What the fuck?" her handheld rings out.

"I'm sorry, Chief," she says, pushing the Walkie on her shoulder.

"What's happening?" she says to Darrell.

"They want nothing, that's all they've said."

Static fizzes on the line.

"Shit, get the lights on the ground...Snakes."

A series of rounds erupts. "They're everywhere...snake den."

But it's too cold for snakes.

Doors slams on the frontline. She stands as a silhouetted officer climbs atop a van. He fires shots. Another officer mounts the van opposite and follows suit.

"Got me...Where they coming from...?"

"Don't shoot them," Japheth cries over the radio. "They're endangered."

The rattlers shake, the tinny noise faint from where Rayne sits.

"Fuck that," another says, and shots ring out.

Remember to breathe.

"Get in the car," Darrell says.

She grabs the handle, swings open the door, and hoists herself into the backseat of the squad car.

He does the same and leans over the wheel, whispering prayers into the speedometer.

"Headlights," Rayne says.

"Ambulance," Chief calls on the radio.

Darrell switches on the headlights, illuminating a group of them slithering toward the car. "Sweet Jesus. Timber rattlers."

She cocks the gun, thrusts open the door, and fires two rounds into the grass.

A helicopter thunders overhead, shining a circle of light on them. Rayne gets out and fires two more rounds. Three scatter and vanish in the darkness.

“Y’all’s in the throat of truth, and I’m that hand that chokes...”

“Who the fuck is talking like that?” someone says over the radio.

The stained glass lights up.

Light pours out of the doorway on the porch.

A squad car speeds past, toward the road.

A shadow emerges, crosses the threshold, out onto the porch, a small frame, in ball cap and shorts. Rayne looks to the ground and back to the church.

The figure edges down the steps.

“Hands up,” the officers call.

Gunfire continues at intervals from the van tops. The kid’s arms go akimbo as he walks toward the first circle. He vanishes from Rayne’s sight, in front of a van.

“What’s going on, chief?” Rayne says.

“We don’t know...think it’s a hostage.”

Her handheld crackles.

Rounds fire.

“Holy shit...pulled a gun...Dan’s down...Suspect down, too.”

A crowd of officers rush in front of the van.

“The slut opens her legs only so long, til she’s worn down, worn out, and our venom bleeds out of her womb, see?”

“They’re on our line,” the chief calls.

Between the cars, Rayne inches closer to the frontline, Darrell following close behind, firing into the ground and loading magazines, until they stop behind a SWAT van.

“Rayne?” Darrell says.

“Just checking things out.”

“You need a jacket.”

They shine a light onto the body of the boy. Between two officers’ legs she sees the frat kid, Stokes, lying splayed out on the grass. A rattler slides over his leg and past him.

“That was one of the hostages, Chief,” Rayne says into the handheld.

“He fired at us,” he says.

Rayne darts toward the crowd, pushing through until she finds Chief. He paces between two of the vans, his rifle pointed at the sky.

“The kid was on Vision, dead to the world.”

“So what do we do?” Chief says.

“Gas the place.”

“We won’t hear the end of it,” he says. “Remember Waco?”

“Take all the heads of the people... hang them up against the sun that my fierce anger may be turned away from Palaver,” Tribes says over the line.

“To hell with gassing, we should just bomb the place,” Chief says.

She runs back to Darrell and they climb into a van. She throws on a bullet-proof vest and gas mask and grabs an MP5, hands shaking as she loads it with 100-round beta cartridges. Darrell pulls a mask overhead, too.

Over the radio, Chief gives the commands, “Gas...storm...arrest, no gunfire.”

They hop out and duck behind the van, keeping an eye on the ground.

“I’m sure Jesus don’t like this one bit,” Darrell says, his voice muffled in the mask. “It being his house and all.”

“I don’t think Jesus lives here anymore,” she says.

The SWAT team empties the vans and surrounds the church.

#

His boots, suit jacket, handkerchief, and shirt are in front of him on the ground. He unfastens his belt and slides down his pants, then his underwear. One foot up, he jerks a sock from his foot, dancing to keep his balance. He removes the other, stands upright, and walks to the edge of the bank. Leaves crunch underfoot. His toes rest just over the side. He lifts his arms, palms meeting above his head.

As he squats to jump, an engine rumbles behind. Lights appear, casting his shadow across the river. He doesn’t turn at first but imagines the possibilities. If he jumps he won’t have to know, he thinks.

But he turns to face it.

Two headlights peer through the trees. He uses one hand to shield his eyes, the other to cover himself.

A door clicks open, and someone gets out of the driver’s side.

“What are you doing?” Timothy asks, shivering.

She inches closer, now in front of the light. He can see her hair’s pulled back and she’s in the dress she wore earlier. “Put your clothes on, Timothy,”

“They’re dirty and wet.”

“This is enough,” she says.

“I’ve crossed every line you’ve drawn,” he says.

As she approaches, he puts a hand out, palm facing her. “You can’t rescue me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you or anyone else to. Understanding isn’t the point.”

The ground breaks under his heel. He loses balance and his arms swing in circles until he’s stumbling forward and falling down on a knee.

“You’re bleeding.”

With the back of his hand he wipes his nose.

She’s half-silhouetted by the beams, but he can see she’s lifted a hand to her mouth and is shaking her head. “You’re in pieces. And you won’t tell me anything. What am I supposed to do?”

“I can tell you what to do,” he says, standing and reaching to cover himself again.

“I’m here now, okay?”

“You can’t see this.”

“You’re not in your right mind.”

“If I go, I go to prepare a place—”

“Please, Timothy. Does it all have to be about God?”

“Is that what you think this is about?”

She’s closer now, reaching out to him, and he puts up a hand again. “Tell Mary Jo I’m sorry. I’m sorry about Raymond and I’m sorry about what happened at the funeral. Sorry for us, too.”

Susannah takes long strides toward him. “That dream I was having. I’ve figured it out. I know what the house means. Timothy!” she cries, but he’s turned and leapt.

#

The grenade launchers fire, the gas bombs thudding out of the barrels and then shattering the stained glass. Gas billows out of the windows and the front door of the church.

“Now!” someone yells.

Feet stomp. Metal clinks.

“Go!”

More glass shatters. Gas fills the air, and a gust of sulfur sweeps over.

Gunshots pierce the night. The team falls back.

“They fired at us. Where are the fucking hostages?”

“They got the place covered...No one in the barn.”

Gunshots ricochet off the armored vans.

“They’re shooting from windows.”

“The fuck we do?”

“The lights,” Rayne says. “Bet there’s a fusebox around back. Is at my parents’ church.”

She runs along the side of the church, crunching the broken glass underfoot under the line of stained glass, and through a dense cloud of gas, turning the corner. A group of officers lean against the wall on either side of the back door, rifles pointed up. A steady stream of gunfire blazes through the doorway. She holds a light to the wall, finds the fuse box, and pulls out the fuses.

“Fuckers,” she says.

A sharp pain shoots through her calf, and she falls to her knees.

“Turn off your lights,” she yells into the hand-held.

“You okay?” one of the officers asks. He gives her an arm and she pulls herself up and shoots into the ground.

She stumbles back to the front of the church and climbs into one of the vans. She’s soaking wet and dizzy.

#

Arms flail at the pull of the river’s arm. He’s keeping his head above at first. Cold envelops him. Rocks pound his legs, knock them from underneath him, toppling him, flipping him. He’s breaking the current enough to gain footing, and it’s shallow enough to stand, or pretend to stand, until he’s tossed against another and collapses, somersaulting into the wet darkness. Never sure whether it’s air or the mud in his hands. Body amorphous, stripped of symmetry by stone hammer thuds, felled tree branches, and beer bottles. Above his head, to his knees, to the back to soothe a blow from jagged stone, his hands juggle. He breathes every time he breaks foam. He tries to put his feet out in front. He’s reaching for the bank, for the mangled hand. Swallowing gallons, coughing them up, drinking them in, spitting them out. Grabbing onto a rock, only a second, enough time catch himself, to spin, to get on his back, legs out in front, feet pointing downriver.

#

Darrell and Rayne fit night vision goggles above their masks.

“Tell them not to use their radios,” she whispers to the first officer she sees as she hops out of the van. “Now. And get night vision ready. I’ll call once I know what’s going on.”

The lights of the squad cars die, then the vans.

“You can’t go in there alone,” the officer says.

“She’s not,” Darrell says behind her.

Rayne staggers up the stairs of the church.

“Rayne? What the hell are you doing?” Chief calls on the radio.

They duck into the foyer of the church.

Bullets ping against the walls. Darrell rolls to the right, Rayne to the left, flanking the entrance to the sanctuary. Silence. The hand-held crackles.

“The detective made it out tonight? Leaving Mary Jo alone to rot,” Tribes says on the line.

The dizziness again. Jesus.

“It’s coming to them,” Tribes says.

She peeks around. A cluster has congregated in front of the communion table, holding rifles, wearing masks. A few others walk between the pews, the gas a pall of fog around. *The fuckers thought of everything.*

She edges the MP5 around the corner and fires low into the sanctuary, aiming at feet. Darrell takes her lead and fires. Never-ending rounds.

Wound them to save them.

The gun clicks. She rolls to the side but doesn’t have the energy to make it to the corner. She gets to her knees, and twists around, her back against the wall.

“Rayne!”

The helicopter drones above.

Darrell’s beta is empty, too. He rolls back.

Two figures walk into the foyer, one pushing the other ahead. The one in the back is taller, shoulders wider. The Whistler, she thinks. Both hold rifles. They turn, trying to figure out where she is, she’s sure, using what little light they have.

“Over here,” she says.

He turns to her.

“Tell them to wait or I shoot the kid,” he says.

Into her handheld, she yells, “Not yet.”

“Shoot the bitch,” he orders the kid.

Rayne shoulders a door beside her as the rounds go off, rolling into the bathroom. She kicks the door shut as bullets blast wood chips around her. Above her is a window. *Barred. Fuck.* Another gunshot. She backs herself into the corner and grabs the Glock from her side, pointing it at the door.

“Now, people,” she screams into the handheld.

Waller kicks open the door and tosses the kid in first to keep it open. He appears in the doorway and pulls his gun up.

Nausea overtakes her. She lifts the mask and pukes.

Footsteps stomp through the foyer and shots fire.

Waller turns quickly but falls back, drops his gun, his body convulsing as they pummel him with bullets.

More footsteps pound through the church.

Darrell kneels beside Rayne. "You hit?"

"Snake."

"We need some antivenin. Now!" he says into his shoulder.

"Get me up," she says.

"You just lie right there," Darrell says.

"No," she says, grabbing at his shoulder.

He helps her stand.

"I gotta finish it."

She pushes him against the bathroom wall and stumbles behind the officers who'd made their way into the sanctuary.

"Jesus, Rayne, you okay?" someone says.

The kids are sprawled out on the floor.

"They had gas masks," Rayne says.

She walks down to the pulpit. Above it, hanging in the baptistery, she can't see the body well, but knows it's Tribes. He swings back and forth.

Too many bodies, she thinks and falls backwards onto the sanctuary floor.

#

The current moves southward. It will empty into a lake close to Montgomery. He'll wash up on the banks, and the first person to see him won't know him, won't know his name, won't know anything about him. It might be a fisherman, maybe a ranger, a game warden, or some kids skipping stones. They'll make up stories, he's sure. A drug dealer, a murderer, victim of a motoring accident. Or the current might push him under a rock, lodging him there until his body falls apart in the movement. Only Susannah will know the story, if she even knows it. He's not even sure what the story is.

The river falls into white water. His feet go down first, hit the river bottom, and the current spits him half onto a cluster of rocks at the center. His chest and torso halfway up. In the cascade, his arms reach across. His hands grip a nook in stone. He pulls himself up, now only his legs in the water. His breathing is furious as he hefts one more time, his

arms pulling, until he's lifted all of himself onto the rock. His elbows give and he collapses.

#

Darrell sits next to her. An IV juts out of her arm.

"Darrell, hi. Cliff. He okay? Where's Mom?"

"I brought your mom this afternoon to see you. Cliff's on the other side of the hospital. You shot him good, right in the knee, but he's alive, just out of it."

Her mouth is dry.

"Your mama's proud."

She licks her lips, trying to get spit to form.

He grabs a bottle from the counter and hands it to her. "There were eleven hostages in all." He looks down at his hands. "Besides the Stokes boy, they all lived."

She takes a drink and replaces the cap, shaking her head. "Poor Brittany." She hands the bottle back to Darrell. "Maybe it'd have been better shoot them all."

"They got 'em under close watch at Emory. They'll figure out what's wrong with 'em."

"What about the officers?" Rayne says.

"Four died."

She winces.

"Tribes had a journal, but the Feds got it. They said it was their jurisdiction now, considered it a terrorist situation. *The Gospel According to No One*. They haven't said a whole lot about it."

"What about Vision?"

"There weren't any drugs."

He stands and takes her hand. "I gotta tell you something. You ain't going to like it much."

"I'm on leave. You are, too, probably," Rayne says.

"How'd you know?" he says.

"Protocol, especially in a high profile case like this. There'll be an investigation and such—how long have I been out, Darrell?"

"Two days. Sure is good to see you back."

He squeezes her hand and leans over, kissing her forehead. "If you don't mind I'll just sit in here and read a bit."

Epilogue

“Let me play you this new song I wrote,” Cliff says, the Taylor across his lap. “I wrote it a few weeks after all the shit went down.” He hefts it up, one hand on the fret, the other plucking at the strings.

It’s a Son Volt ripoff, his voice little better than the raspy croak of Jay Farrar. Rayne doesn’t listen to the words, but his voice, trembling as it rises and falls over the clumsy melody.

Around the room he’s hung his alt-country posters, Whiskeytown, Uncle Tupelo, and Robbie Fulks.

Beside him on the end table is a collection of dirty coffee mugs. A pair of jeans is strewn across the floor.

“Wrote it in ten minutes,” he says as he plays the last chord of the outro.

“I can tell.”

“Don’t be rude.” He sits the guitar in front of him against the coffee table. “I really felt all that shit.”

“Was kidding. I like it, Cliff. It’s true.”

“The fuck you been up to anyway?” he says, leaning back in the chair and lighting a cigarette. “Haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“Just writing speeding tickets now. Mama and me started a small vegetable garden.”

“Ah, thus the tomatoes.” He nods toward the basket Rayne has put beside her on the floor. “Really glad you shot me, by the way.” He stands and limps into the kitchen. “Anything to drink?”

“I better get going. Just wanted to see how you were doing.”

He comes back into the room with a Coors in one hand, the cigarette in the other. His tee shirt is stained yellow at the pits. “Been better. But Hell, I’m alive. Erika, my rehab woman, has been a babe. Doctor says I can get this cast off in a week or two. Finally. You shot through every fucking bone in my leg.”

“It could’ve been Darrell.”

“I know what your bullets feel like,” he laughs. “And guess what? I’m engaged.”

“No kidding?”

He leans against the chair. “Yeah, so Erika is totally into music and stuff. I’ve been teaching her to play guitar.”

“I heard you’re back at the store, too.”

"I am. Going to be okay, you know? In a weird way, that Vision shit got me off everything else. What about you? You seeing anybody? Or just dump anybody?"

Rayne stands and takes the basket to his kitchen. He follows her in, stops at the opposite side.

She sets down the basket and reaches into her handbag at her side. "Well, someone's been asking," she says. "I also brought this." She takes out a Son Volt CD and places it on top of the tomatoes. "A new one."

"You're a strange bird."

She rounds the table, hugging him. "Get a bath, Cliff, Jesus."

#

She opens the double doors of the police station. Mary Jo sits behind the reception desk, phone to her face. It had taken some prodding, but Rayne insisted her mother get out, do something. "The isolation's not good for you, Mama," she'd told her in late spring. Just a week before she'd conceded and took a part-time job at the station.

Rayne stops at the desk and places her elbows on the counter.

Mary Jo pushes buttons on the phone and sets the receiver down.

"How you settling in?" Rayne asks.

"Don't worry about me, Darling."

Rayne double takes when she sees what her mother's wearing. "Suit pants?"

"Got 'em on sale. And before I forget, someone at *Palaver Times* called wanting to do another interview."

Rayne drops her head to the counter. "Never going to stop."

"I'm sure it'll settle down some. You look downright exhausted. You sleeping good?"

"Not really."

The phone rings again. Rayne offers a quick smile and waves as Mary Jo picks up the phone.

Down the hall, she hears Darrell's laughter erupt. She walks through reception to the lounge and pushes open the door. He's doubled over the table, a stream of smoke rising from his fingers. Japheth's leaning against the wall, cigarette in one hand, the other covering his mouth as he coughs.

"Can't do it," Japheth says, leaning over the table and stubbing out the cigarette.

"Rayne," Darrell says, trying to catch his breath. "We almost got Japheth a vice."

Rayne grabs a Danish from the counter and pulls up a chair beside Darrell.

"I'll leave you to your evil devices," Japheth says and pushes open the door. "Got a case to work."

Darrell leans back and crosses his arms. "All grown up."

"Someone has to take our place. How's it going?"

"Well," he says. "Same ole, I guess. Saw that doctor on Friday you been telling me to see. Pretty nice fella, but I don't understand half of what he says. Keeps talking about what the snakes in my dreams mean. I'm pretty sure I already know what they mean."

"It'll take some time," she says.

"Still ain't got rid of all those tomatoes?"

"One more stop," she says. "You up for a quick bite after your shift?"

#

With a basket under one arm she knocks on the apartment door. In a pocket she's stuffed the bracelet Sherman had given her.

She's just a hop away from Palaver U's campus, standing under the awning of the beige apartment complex known as River View. It's funny, she thinks, the Little Nee Nee being miles from the place. Sherman's Prius sits in the parking lot.

Tracey cracks open the door, then swings it wide. "Rayne?"

Rayne knew she'd be surprised. She steps inside the apartment, thick with vanilla and mulberry.

Tracey stands just back from the door in the foyer. "Tomatoes?"

"For your trip. My last basket. My long day as tomato lady is over."

"They look juicy." Tracey grabs it from her and walks through the hallway. "This way."

In the living room Rayne sits on the sofa while Tracey puts the tomatoes on her IKEA dining table. The room is bare walled, except for a picture of the train depot hanging above the gas fireplace.

"What's the plan?" Rayne says.

Tracey falls into an armchair across the room. "Just going to cut straight across. I-20, I think."

"I mean once you're out there."

"I've rented a dorm. You won't believe how beautiful it is out there. And I'm close to the beach. I've looked at hundreds of pictures of it."

"Happy for you," Rayne says, the keys jingling in her hand.

"You enjoying patrolling again?"

“After all the tribunals and the investigations by the F.B.I., hell yes.”

“I was so scared, Rayne. When they put me up there, I swear to God, I wanted to puke.”

“What you went through—”

“It’s okay, really.”

“You held together better than Sherman.”

“Deer in headlights, huh?”

They laugh.

“Heard from him lately?”

“No. Thought about visiting him once but then my brain started working.”

“What’s he doing?” Rayne reaches into her pocket to pull out the bracelet.

“He’s at a youth detention center teaching history. All boys school,” Tracey says and chuckles.

“You miss him?”

“Rayne, I loved him. But he was poison, you know? Completely fucked up.”

Rayne thinks better of it, pulling out an empty hand.

#

The white sign reads “Welcome to Slocomb, Alabama.”

Timothy’s walked thirty-five miles in the last four days, sleeping outside, bundling his suit jacket beneath for a pillow.

He’s slept on stretches of farmland, in thickets off to the side of the highway, and, when it’s rained, as it had two nights before, barns, lean-tos, and deer-hunting stands.

The sun is bright today, and his shirt is soaked through.

He knows he smells. His last bath, in a creek that ran the length of an abandoned farm, was five days ago.

Today his suit jacket is thrown over his shoulder, one hand holding it in place as he walks along the highway.

Only occasionally does a car pass, always old, always sputtering by.

The people wave, as if he’s always been in Slocomb, the town’s own son.

As a truck, an ancient Tacoma, slows beside him now, a girl cries “bang bang” from the window, holding out a pink water pistol.

The truck bumps onto the shoulder.

“Give you a lift?” a man says from the driver’s seat and then turns to spit out his side. Then back to Timothy, “Hot day.”

The girl shoots Timothy in the face, and he lifts a hand to wipe it away. It feels nice.

“Dara, have some respect,” he says, pulling her back down on her bottom in the seat.

Timothy waves them on. “No, sir.”

“Good place to eat down the road. Buffet. Little late in the afternoon, but they might still be open. Make sure you get the fried cornbread.”

“Will do.”

The truck coughs and blows a black cloud of smoke behind as it creaks onto the highway.

One foot in front of the other, he thinks.

Once downtown, he walks the two blocks around. He stops to look at himself at the Barbershop. He assumes it’s Sunday because the place is closed. Between the red, white, and blue lettering on the window, he sees his hair’s gotten long, falling below his ears. He needs a shave, too, his five o’clock shadow now a month-long. If he stays the night in Slocomb, he’ll come back, perch on a chair, and hear an old man wax eloquent about the place.

He pops into a diner at the end of the street, not feeling like a buffet. He folds his jacket over the back of a stool at the counter and sits, his feet struggling to find the foot prop.

“I’m Rhonda,” the server says and sets down a laminated menu. “Know what you want to drink?”

He hasn’t eaten in days. His eyes are overwhelmed by the choices. “Just a water to drink.”

She scurries off. One finger goes down the left column, then the right. He decides, and when she returns with his glass, he lifts his face to hers. “I’ll have the T-bone, three eggs, and grits.”

She’s scribbling on her order pad, her head turned sideways. “That be it?”

“For now.”

When he lifts the menu back to her, their eyes meet. She stops, hand suspended above his, “Well,” she says, “you look just like a preacher.”

Timothy’s feet have fallen off the foot prop again. He pulls them up, looks at her. Her full lips are pulled into a smile. The diner sun illuminates her freckles, blue eyes, and red hair, pulled back.

He's looking at her, through her, past her, through the walls of the diner to the Slocomb sky, the Earth's sky, and into the whole goddamn universe, half-smiling.

He knows what she's thinking. She can't figure out whether to laugh or fall to her knees in repentance.

Neither can he.

THE END

Notes on Ancient Texts

The ostrakon in the novel is based on one held in the Egger Collection in Paris. It is called 'Healing ostrakon,' and the text was translated by Marvin Meyer and published in *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 32-33.

All passages quoted from *The Holy Bible* come from the King James Version.

The Practice of Place, An Introduction to Rewriting the South: Eudora Welty and the Self-conscious Southern Novel

One of the reasons Eudora Welty's work has continued to receive critical attention is because of its duplicitous, sometimes paradoxical, handlings of Place. What I set out to do in the following chapters is not so much propose a definitive reading of what constitutes Place in Welty's work but, rather, to show that it cannot be constituted at all. Using *The Optimist's Daughter* and *Delta Wedding* I explore how her relationship to the imagined South changes not only from the beginning to the end of her novel-writing career but also within the respective works themselves.

Problems naturally arise when one begins to compare the South that Welty experienced with the South of her novels. By and large, her past South is an imagined place. Although true for any novelist who sets a work in the past, the issue cannot be taken for granted. Fifty years of scholarship has wrestled with Welty's lived experience of the South apparent in, and informative of, her fiction. The issue is also relevant because Southern literature in general has been criticised for recycling conceptualisations of the South. But, trying to propose a theoretical, systematic process to account for how or why Welty moved from point A (Place in the world) to point B (Place in her fiction) is futile. What can account for the setting of her first novella, *The Robber Bridegroom* (the 1790's) or the settings of her first two novels, *Delta Wedding* (the 1920's) and *Losing Battles* (the 1930's)? All three works imagine times and places to which Welty had no access--at least in her contemporary 'reality.' Perhaps we can conjecture only that her contemporary Place in reality (Jackson, Mississippi in the 1940's and late 1960's, respectively) helped to create the past representational reality in her fiction. Exploring the relationship between the two is a troublesome endeavour, though some have done as much with success.¹ I hope to reconcile the phenomenological conundrum at work between 'realism' and representation by suggesting that depicting the past South is largely an embodied practice that eludes definitive theorization. I also believe calling works that are set in contemporary milieus 'realistic' problematic. The writer's conceptualisations of the present are just as much the work of subjectivity as his or her conceptualisations of the past. Welty was keenly aware of this idea, believing that 'writing is an expression of the

¹ Suzanne Marrs, for instance, claims that *Delta Wedding* speaks to Welty's anxieties about WWII in her essay "'The Treasure Most Dearly Regarded': Memory and Imagination in *Delta Wedding*" in *One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

writer's own peculiar personality' ('Place,' p. 795). Perhaps, then, the most we can say is that the Southern writer with a penchant for the past uses both the ground of the present 'reality' in which he or she lives (filtered through the artist's subjectivity) and the 'realities' of past narratives, too. A common theme throughout this work, especially in the final chapter, is the extent to which these past places, even if imagined, inform and shape our conceptualisations of contemporary Place.

Welty was aware of the complex symbioses at work between living in a place, imagining a place, and then writing about a place. For some critics, she was too aware. Lionel Trilling, Diana Trilling, Isaac Rosenfeld, and George Y. Trail, all critics who reviewed her works at their publication, criticised Welty for the self-conscious dimensions they saw in her writing.² Michael Kreyling has also made much of her self-consciousness in his work on *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*.³ Welty never seemed to shirk from or rebut their claims. In 'Place in Fiction,' when discussing Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Welty writes that it [Faulkner's Place] becomes universal only as a result of the fact that the first concern for Faulkner is that it is 'his own created world' ('Place,' p. 790). Much of my research, then, explores Welty as the mediator of Place rather than what constitutes Place in and of itself.

The most recent exhaustive study of self-consciousness in Welty's work is the 2003 book *Strange Felicities: Eudora Welty's Subtexts on Fiction and Society* by the Japanese scholar, Naoko Fuwa Thornton.⁴ Not since then have scholars turned their attention to self-consciousness in Welty's work. However, the extent to which it saturates her novels requires careful attention and should be of paramount importance to any theoretical frame that one applies to the texts. Although this gap in Welty scholarship means that I am forced to use somewhat dated material, it also means that my added insights offer fresh contributions to Welty studies. Furthermore, I build many of my other insights on Welty studies that were popular in the 1980's, 1990's, and early 2000's, when the focus of much Welty criticism centred on her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*, and on aesthetic and narrative issues. Part of the reason for this is that Place studies, at least as they relate to Welty, seem to have been exhausted—or are old news.

² For complete reference information for all four critics see bibliography.

³ See Kreyling's *Understanding Eudora Welty*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), and 'Eudora Welty as Novelist: A Historical Approach,' in Gretlund, Jan Norby, and others, eds, *The Late Novels of Eudora Welty* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 3-17.

⁴ Naoko Fuwa Thornton, *Strange Felicity: Eudora Welty's Subtexts on Fiction and Society* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

The same goes for scholarship that seeks to look at her autobiography in relation to her oeuvre.⁵ Recent criticism on her work moves the discussion to issues peripheral to the points I make here, though I am convinced that my readings of the texts will prove useful in a discussion of Place and Postmodernism in Welty's work.

I argue in the following pages that it is Welty's struggle to depict the imagined South in novel form that leads to her self-consciousness. Moving from an experienced South (a word that suggests a solidified Place), which is no easy task in and of itself, to the *South represented* reveals the many discourses at work in the construction of Southern Place. As a result, the novels at times become narratives about constructing Place rather than narratives *with* (a) Place. What we see in *The Optimist's Daughter* and *Delta Wedding* is an effort to make sense of these many Souths at work. Each work reveals different attitudes toward its subject. In *Delta Wedding*, the question is how to make the South congeal into a singular vision of Place. As a first-time novelist, she's optimistic--if also reluctant to believe--that she can sustain the vision and piece her world together in a solidified manner. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, the question is how to leave behind a place (or places) that the writer cannot constitute into a single vision. By the end of her novel-writing career, Welty relents to the forces that seek to redefine--or even undo any definitive understanding of--the South.

Because of Welty's emphasis on artistic vision, one cannot claim she was ultimately, as Martyn Bone does, anachronistic.⁶ Although in each novel her vision was centred on the evocation of a 'world,' that world always becomes 'worlds.' One can argue the case that her work supports Agrarian sensibilities just as one might argue that she saw profound problems with those sensibilities. Theoretical narratives that place Welty within the Southern Renaissance or Southern Modernist traditions, that highlight Virginia Woolf's impact on her, or, as this study does, explore the nature of self-consciousness in her work play an integral role in helping the scholar to understand her (they have their places), just as they had an integral role in helping her to understand herself perhaps. They reveal the complexities of demarcating or grounding Place in her work. What we see in Welty, then, is the struggle to realize that the 'real' South, as Scott Romine believes, is the 'fake South.'⁷ Whenever someone claims that Welty 'crusades' on any given topic, another

⁵ An exception to this is Sally Wolff's new book, *A Dark Rose: Love in Eudora Welty's Stories and Novels*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2014).

⁶ Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in American Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006), p. 39.

⁷ Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Kindle Edition, 2008; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), p. 9.

scholar easily rebuttals it with a counter reading.⁸ This can easily be said of many authors, I suppose, but it is important to draw attention to the fact here when so many have tried to place her within specific literary movements. What my study offers to Welty studies is an opening of the possibilities that the relationship between her imagination and the idea of place is as varied and nuanced as the critical explorations of her work and, what's more, that this changing relationship is at least partly responsible for the multiple readings of her work.

In my first chapter I suggest that parts of *The Optimist's Daughter* are 'parodic.' When I use this term, I do not mean to suggest she simply emulates writers, sensibilities, or styles before her. Rather, her approach takes into account the 'written' nature of Southern discourses and draws attention to those representations as fiction. I have tried to make a distinction throughout the work between the Real South and the 'imagined South' to highlight this distinction—though, once fully explored, the reader should see that Welty's novels point to the idea that all conceptualisations of the South are, in fact, imagined.

This focus on the imaginative processes, however, creates a paradox in her work, setting her against her own ideas of what the novel should be. In 'Place in Fiction,' Welty believes that the writer's 'clear intention [is]...to make the reader see only one of the pictures--the author's--under the pleasing illusion that it is the world's; this enormity is the accomplishment of a good story' ('Place,' p. 789). However, in light of her definition, how can her novels be 'good' stories if we are made aware of the artist's presence--or, as I argue, struggle--in them? Does her self-consciousness ultimately undermine the illusion of the 'world's reality' for the reader? I think it does. These self-conscious disruptions to the narratives, however, show us a different kind of reality, one that is truer to the experiences of Place. The world's picture is as much of a fiction as the author's picture. The disruption is essentially the 'world's,' too, inasmuch as the 'world' (outward perceived reality) is enmeshed in fictional constructions of selfhood and

⁸ In *Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding*, Cecilia Donohue argues that the novel 'reveals varied inconsistencies, along with the potential for multiple interpretations of the author's intent and message' and believes that 'one instance of indeterminate meaning is the novel's ambiguity toward the issues of gender power' as evidenced by 'an alive-and-well male patriarchy with which women feel compelled to comply.' In the same book, Imola Bülgözdi believes the reader sees the beginning of 'the erosion of the patriarchal family myth.' See Donohue, Cecilia, "...nothing really, nothing really so very much happened!": Indeterminate Meaning in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, ed. by Bouton Reine Dugas (Amsterdam: Dialogue, 2008), pp 81-90 (p. 81) and Imola Bülgözdi, 'Probing the Limits of Self,' in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, ed. by Bouton Reine Dugas (Amsterdam: Dialogue, 2008), pp 91-106 (p. 91).

conceptualisations of community, history, and place. The illusion that the author's vision is also the world's is shattered, thus revealing that the fragmented world of the South in her fiction is representative of the fragmented world of the South that the reader believes is the South of his or her reality. The novels, then, act as a kind of confluence--a favourite word of Welty's--of this struggle to make meaning. Both the novels and Welty writing the novels are at work in trying to decode the complexities of the South. Her novels are 'good,' then, for a reason she had not realized. As I explore in the first two chapters, she shows the reader the world of the South as it is: the work of subjectivity, fragmented and multitudinous.

It is one thing to call a work self-conscious. It is quite another to claim, as I do in the following chapters, that the author has allegorized her struggle to represent the South through characters in the work. Whether or not I think Welty intentionally meant to allegorize her struggle to represent the South or whether these processes are unconscious is a troubling aspect of the study. Some of what I propose seems to necessitate an explicit move on Welty's part, especially considering the intricacies of the allegory in *The Optimist's Daughter*. But, I do not think this has to be the case. In 'Place in Fiction,' Welty writes,

The writer must accurately choose, combine, superimpose upon, blot out, shake up, alter the outside world for one absolute purpose, the good of his story. To do this, he is always seeing double, two pictures at once in his frame, his and the world's, a fact that he constantly comprehends; and he works best in a state of constant and subtle and unfooled reference between the two.' ('Place,' p. 789)

Because the world is also inextricably tied to--or created by--the artist's vision, however, what happens in the novels of Welty, I believe, is a 'fooled' reference wherein both frames--the world's and the author's--are dependent upon the author, and, as a result, the artist's vision becomes allegorized within the artist's place. No demarcations exist between the two abstractions. They ultimately become one, which creates an inversion in which the author obscures (naturally) the idea that outward reality has an ontological status. Because Welty was self-conscious enough to draw attention to this practice between moving between the two fictional worlds, we are made aware of the Practice of Place.

My readings of these novels, however, are not attempts to undermine the import of the story proper (the actual narrative) or to draw attention to a greater story found in the allegorical readings. Just as Welty's self-consciousness undermines a myopic metanarrative of the South and offers opportunities for interesting and varied perspectives

on Southern identity, the allegorical readings offer another way of ‘seeing’ without sacrificing other narratives—in this case the surface narrative. Perhaps it goes without saying, but I do not propose they are definitive readings of the novels. If I suggest as much, I have undermined the purpose of my overarching argument, which is that both novels have many stories at work on their pages. Laurel’s reminiscence on her past and her final thoughts on her living memory in *The Optimist’s Daughter*, the bittersweet moment when Ellen recognizes her love for George in *Delta Wedding*, and Laura’s outspread arms at the end of *Delta Wedding* mean no less and affect the reader no less when seen another way. In short, even if the writer’s vision (quite different from the technical considerations of Place) cannot fortify itself against the scrutiny of postmodern polemics, I do not believe the writer’s vision is--or can be--dismantled.⁹

Despite my readings of the novels as allegories of the writer, I have chosen not to use the term metafiction, first because the term was not coined until the seventies and second because I do not read metafiction in her work as a preoccupation with the fiction as fiction. The self-consciousness is a direct result of the struggle to understand and represent locale. It makes specific comments, though often ambiguous, on Place, rather than circling back on itself, referring to itself and even its own reflexivity, as we might read in the work of John Barth, for instance. It is self-consciousness, I argue, in the service of making sense of the South.

Before beginning the study proper, it is helpful to look at the novella *The Robber Bridegroom* as an example of the ways that Welty’s self-consciousness reveals the struggle to represent multiple discourses of the South. The novella, published in 1942, is a Southern fairy tale, set in the Natchez region of Mississippi long before 1942. In a review, Lionel Trilling wrote that the narrative’s ‘lucidity, its grace, and its simplicity have a quality that invalidates them all—they are too conscious...and nothing can be falser, more purple and “literary,” than conscious simplicity.’¹⁰ However, the self-consciousness in the novella works to undermine any semblance of simplicity. The book’s fairy tale conventions do not preclude greater comments, complicated ones, on the history of the South and Southern storytelling. For instance, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi believes the novella is a ‘hybrid form characterized by irony and parody’ and ‘can be seen as announcing the

⁹ I write more about this in the bridging chapter.

¹⁰ Lionel Trilling, ‘American Fairy Tale,’ *Nation*, 19 December 1942, pp. 686-687, in *Eudora Welty: The Critical Reviews*, ed. by Pearl Amelia McHaney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 27-28 (p. 27).

re-writing of traditional genres that took place in the 1960's and 1970's.'¹¹ Zorzi believes 'experimentation with a new form goes beyond modernism into what is typically labelled as postmodernism.'¹² Zorzi also explores how Welty incorporates the tall tale, the fairy tale, the economic and social realities of the Old South, and even Greek mythology.¹³ However insightful the observations, Zorzi's reading does not further tie in the significance of Welty's blending technique. My angle offers to fill in this theoretical gap by suggesting the technique is in service of larger concerns about Place, namely the inability of codifying a monolithic Southern discourse.

It is important to note that a feature with which Zorzi associates with the 'realities' Old South, the Natchez Indians, was no longer a feature of the South in which Welty set the work¹⁴: 'by 1730 the French had all but eliminated the Natchez. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the present time of the events of *The Robber Bridegroom*, the Natchez were already as exotic as the residents of Atlantis.'¹⁵ Kreyling believes Welty's addition of 'a background of genocide against which the romantic comedies are played out gives Welty's story the peculiar doubleness that mystified reviewers and still puzzles some readers.'¹⁶

The inclusion of the Natchez Indians in the novella, Thornton believes, reveals the 'lies' of American history, 'made up of such verbal constructs as 'the New World,' the 'Great West,' 'sublime nature,' 'the frontier,' and 'the pursuit of happiness.'¹⁷ Their presence in the 1790s of the novella is a reminder that western expansion has come at a great cost and that the settlers can never be 'rid' of the ghosts of the French massacre of the Natchez.¹⁸

Using fairy-tale conventions, then, does not suggest that Welty dismisses, Romanticizes, or relegates the Amerindians to the past. It is also not, as Zorzi believes, simply a blending of the fantastical and realistic. Rather, such self-consciousness shows the extent to which American mythologies of Exceptionalism have been built on fictions and the extent to which those fictions still haunt the landscape. Rosamond, Clement, Salome, and Mike Finch's fates are inextricably tied, and determined by, a past people

¹¹ Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, 'Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom*: A New Use of the Fairy Tale,' *Eudora Welty Review*, 3 (Spring 2011), 23-32 (p. 23).

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁵ Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁷ Thornton, p. 55.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 52-56.

who no longer physically exist in their reality, the 1790's. Welty's inclusion of them, despite the fact that they are an anachronistic feature, is an act of cultural reproduction that signifies the complex relationship between the Southerners and the brutal past that continues to inform the present, whether the present of the novella or the present of the 1940's.

Furthermore, because this fictional reality of the 1790's cannot be grounded in any historical account of the 1790's, we see a further layer of fictional representation. The correlation between history and fiction are shown to be shaky. The story points to the fictional nature of itself in order to comment on the fictional nature of our own perceptions, whether about American Idealism, the plantation economies of the Old South, or the genocide of the Natchez Indians. This is an apt example of the ways that the practice of Place reveals itself to be practice. The 'world's' picture (the existence of the Amerindians in the 1790's) with which the author works also happens to be the author's picture.

When Welty writes, 'As for Rosamond, she did not mean to tell anything but the truth, but when she opened her mouth [...] the lies would simply fall out like diamonds and pearls,'¹⁹ we might as well read 'Welty' for Rosamond. The lies are 'like diamonds and pearls' because they are valuable insights regarding the Southern storyteller's processes and their relationships to place (*Robber*, p. 37).

These Places, and the processes that create them, are the foci of the following chapters. In "'A Featureless Sky": The Postmodern Turn of *The Optimist's Daughter*,' I argue that the novel be read as a kind of swansong to representational modes. I explore the extent to which competing Southern discourses—most notably in the form of the New South—ultimately exhaust Welty's vision of place. Judge McElva and Mt. Salus represent the modes of Southern discourse with which Welty has often been categorized, the Southern Renaissance. But McElva's marriage to Fay, who sees little value in place, community, or even the symbolic power of objects, represents the tug of war battle that Welty has long waged between representation and her imagined Place. McElva's death at the hands of Fay and Laurel's leaving Mt. Salus represent a departure from Place in fiction. At the end of the novel, when Laurel sets down the breadboard, it is Welty setting down Place as evoked in her fiction.

While the order might seem counterintuitive, I have placed a discussion of *Delta Wedding* after *The Optimist's Daughter*. I did this for two reasons. First, I thought it

¹⁹ Eudora Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom*, (Kindle Edition: Orlando: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), p. 37. Final footnote from same edition.

important to start at the end because the allegory of the writer is more pronounced in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Second, much of my reading of *Delta Wedding* is dependent on my reading of *The Optimist's Daughter* and not vice versa. This, I believe, is a result of a conscious effort on Welty's part to use *Delta Wedding* in the construction of the last novel.

Seen through the lens of *The Optimist's Daughter*, *Delta Wedding* shows Welty at odds with place, though in a different fashion from her struggle in the last novel. The struggle in the first novel is how to begin and what to make of the place that she has chosen to depict, that of the imagined Mississippi Delta in the 1920's. Besides profound dread and childlike wonder, what emerges from this study is a sense that Welty reveals both the continuation of the Southern Plantation discourse in 1946 and its dissolution, both the comforts and horrors of belonging to place (both past and present), and the limitations and infinite possibilities of the imagination in constructing place. Ultimately, Welty struggles to locate the Shellmound Plantation--or even the Mississippi Delta--in her artistic vision. Shellmound both struggles and thrives, buckles under the weight of time and change and brims with youthful energy and delight. Juxtaposed with *The Optimist's Daughter*, though the 'places' are different, we see in *Delta Wedding* similar concerns, relating to both the artist's vision and the objects of her vision.

In the final section of the critical project, I establish the reasons for choosing Welty as a study, dismantle what I see as a dichotomy between the postmodern and the Southern, and then move toward a discussion of the relevance of this study to my creative piece, my novel, *The Gospel According to No One*. Using both my experience of the South and my imagined South, I explore postmodern conceptualisations of Place in order to show how, like Welty, I have struggled with perceiving and imagining Southern Place.

Chapter 1: 'A Featureless Sky': The Postmodern Turn of Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*

Throughout the critical history of Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* the consensus on the meaning of the novel has hardly changed. Most who offer interpretations, particularly of the ending scenes, follow the basic line of interpretation that Reynolds Price, Cleanth Brooks,¹ and a host of reviewers offered soon after its publication. Scholars still accept as the novel's central concern Laurel McElva Hand's struggle to negotiate the *past remembered* with a present that seems incongruous with it. While I do not seek to challenge this basic understanding of the plot, or Laurel's realization, I do want to situate both within a new reading that picks up where scholars leave off and further expound upon its connection to Welty's vocation. If so many scholars see parallels between Eudora Welty and the protagonist of *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel McElva Hand, what are we to do, in regards to *Welty as writer*, with the conclusions Laurel draws about the role of memory and her relationship to Mount Salus? While scholars have sought to connect the two works, none has made the next step in connecting the ending of the novel to Welty's end as a novelist, at least not explicitly. Since it is her last published work of fiction, novel or otherwise, this connection is important to understanding Welty's place in Southern letters. Reading the novel as an allegory of Welty's retirement reveals the relationship between her imagined Place and craft and the ways that she has exhausted that craft. Ultimately, Welty resigns, I argue, because she realizes that *her* South can no longer signify the South at all. This reading is important because it challenges the recent sentiment espoused by scholars such as Martyn Bone that Welty's work, as a whole, is anachronistic.² Rather than the rehashing of *South imagined* that we see in *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*, the novel surveys Welty's career self-consciously and reveals the writer realizing her parodic tether has stretched taut, a self-consciousness that appropriates its own fictions as fictions, disrupting any consistent narratives of Place.

¹ See Cleanth Brooks, 'The Past Reexamined: *The Optimist's Daughter*,' in *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction*, ed. by Laurie Champion (Westport: Greenwood P, 1994), pp. 226-234 and Reynolds Price, 'The Onlooker Smiling: An Early Reading of *The Optimist's Daughter*,' *Modern Critical Views: Eudora Welty*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 75-78.

² Bone, p. 39.

A sampling of the critical reception of her previous novel, *Losing Battles*, contextualizes the ways that *The Optimist's Daughter* seems a marked departure from her earlier mediation of place. Jonathan Yardley writes in *The New Republic*, 'If I am correct in guessing that it is a work motivated in large measure by nostalgia, then it is a nostalgia not merely for a lost South but for a *lost Southern literature*.'³ Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates, in *Atlantic Monthly*, writes,

In 1970 the concerns of *Losing Battles* are extinct. The large, happy family and its outdoor feast are extinct; the loyalty to a postage-stamp corner of the world is extinct; the unquestioning Christian faith, the complex and yet very simple web of relationships that give these people their identities, binding them to a particular past and promising for them a particular, inescapable future; all extinct.⁴

If *Losing Battles* expresses nostalgia for 'a lost Southern literature' as Yardley writes, it also serves as the last candlelight flicker of the genre for Welty.⁵ It is important to point out, however, that Welty would probably not agree with the idea that her work was a conscious response to the critics. In an interview in the *Paris Review*, Welty said, 'The critic can't really have a say in what a writer chooses to write about—that's the writer's lone responsibility.'⁶ Instead, Welty realized before them that this fictional place, her oeuvre, was ageing. After all, the comedic plot of *Losing Battles* unfolds around a birthday celebration for the ninety-year-old matriarch of the family, Granny Vaughn. If the focus in *Losing Battles* is the celebration of an almost expired or irrelevant literature in the South, however, *The Optimist's Daughter* both accepts and mourns the death of this literature. The transition is a natural one to make for a writer ready to hang it up.

The Optimist's Daughter accepts the loss of Welty's Southern literature by juxtaposing the two forces at work in the construction of Welty's fiction: the imagined *South as Place*, which she has said is her inspiration and her 'source of knowledge,' and the powers of her craft that have mediated that place through language.⁷ As a result of this

³ Jonathan Yardley, 'The Last Good One,' *New Republic*, 9 May 1970, pp. 33-36 in *Eudora Welty: The Critical Reviews*, ed. by Pearl Amelia McHaney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) pp. 167-170 (p. 169).

⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, 'Eudora's Web,' *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1970, pp. 118-20, 122, in *Eudora Welty: The Critical Reviews*, ed. by Pearl Amelia McHaney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 149-153 (p. 151).

⁵ Yardley, p. 169.

⁶ Eudora Welty Interviewed by Linda Kuehl, *Paris Review*, Fall 1972, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4013/the-art-of-fiction-no-47-eudora-welty>, [accessed 17 May 2014].

⁷ Ibid.

juxtaposition, we have a different kind of Welty novel in *The Optimist's Daughter*. The novel is *so* different in its execution that, Kreyling writes, it seems 'to be by another author.'⁸

To establish the link between the protagonist, Laurel McElva Hand, and Eudora Welty one must invoke the long-studied relationship between the novel and autobiographical elements. Renae R. Applegate House believes 'most obviously Welty's exposition regarding memory and storytelling pertains to the actual writer.'⁹ She suggests the novel blends the 'facts' of Welty's life from the autobiography with the fiction of the narrative in order to present a *story of storytelling*.¹⁰ Kreyling sees Laurel as the 'artist' Welty, 'the writer who begins' and also believes that *The Optimist's Daughter* is [...] 'reflective of Welty's vocation, if not of her life.'¹¹ The commonalities are obvious. Both Laurel Hand and Eudora Welty are from Mississippi. They both work with representations, Laurel as a visual artist turned designer and Welty as a writer. They both were a part of the upper-middle class. Welty wrote the novel shortly after the death of her mother, and the novel's plot focuses on Laurel's father's death; Welty's mother, like Laurel's, was from West Virginia.

None of the scholars mentioned above, however, explores what reading Laurel's narrative as *Welty as writer* might suggest about Welty and her profession.¹² Identifying—and emphasizing—the representational (or vocational) autobiography over the personal, mostly as it relates to relationships to her family, is necessary to considering the novel a swansong. By looking at just a few details, one sees a strong parallel between Laurel and Welty's autobiography collapse: Laurel has spent much of her time away from Mount Salus, living in Chicago, and Welty has lived in Jackson, Mississippi for most of her life. Welty never married, and we know that Laurel was married for five years to Philip Hand. Philip Hand also plays an integral role in Laurel's transformation at the

⁸ Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 210.

⁹ Renae R. Applegate House, "'But to be released is to tell, to unburden it': Storytelling in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 59.1/2 (Winter 2005/Spring 2006), 95-106 (p. 97).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹¹ He does not, however, establish an allegorical connection to the extent I have here, nor does he view this, her last novel, as a comment on novel-writing. Kreyling, pp. 210, 212.

¹² Kreyling's reading of the end, however, one in which he proposes that Laurel 'turns her back' on the problem presented in the plot is useful because it strengthens my argument that the end of the novel represents surrender rather than triumph. Kreyling believes that Laurel's moment of 'reconciliation' is 'as much flight from the scene as release' and that Laurel 'has not so much "solved the problem" of Fay as simply turned her back on it. And, since Fay is the future and the future is life, Laurel's "triumph" might be in name only.' Kreyling, *Understanding*, pp. 232-233.

end.¹³ So, how can Laurel, a widow who has been gone from the South for years, serve as a double for unmarried Welty, who spent most of her life in Jackson, Mississippi? Seen through the autobiographical lens, this is problematic. Of course, one can claim a certain poetic license to Welty in fictionalizing her life. But, since her life has been to a great extent informed by living in the South, it is a stretch to see Laurel, who is an outsider from the beginning, as representative of Welty. When Laurel arrives in New Orleans, ‘her suit [is] wintry for New Orleans’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 3). Later, Fay tells her, ‘Oh, I wouldn’t have run off and left anybody that needed me. Just to call myself an artist and make a lot of money’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 28). And, at the wake, as Laurel defends the memory of her father against the Mount Salus residents, Major Bullock tells her, ‘Honey, you were away. You were sitting up yonder in Chicago, drawing pictures’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 80). The imaginative place of Laurel in the text seems too much on the outside to serve as a representation of the ‘real’ Welty. As such, it is within the differences between Laurel McElva Hand and Eudora Welty that we find the most evidence for the novel as a story about vocation.

Laurel’s base, Chicago, was influential in Welty’s early years. While she studied at the University of Wisconsin, on weekends she would visit Chicago where she spent time in the art museums.¹⁴ In the section, ‘Finding My Voice,’ from *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty writes, ‘After I transferred...to the University of Wisconsin, I made in this far, new place a discovery for myself that has fed my life ever since.’¹⁵ Before leaving for Wisconsin, we know that from her father she receives her ‘first typewriter...[a] little red Royal Portable’ and that her father told her to ‘go head and try [herself]’ (*One*, p. 925). We also know that it was in the north she first learned the word for what she felt when studying poetry: passion (*One*, p. 924). So, the fact that Laurel lives, and has lived, in Chicago points to the genesis of Welty’s creative life, the beginning of her craft and career. Laurel in Chicago represents Welty’s *beginnings fictionalized*. Even Fay and Major Bullock, in the passages above, tie Laurel’s living in Chicago to being an ‘artist’ and ‘drawing pictures’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 80).

The other major difference is Laurel’s marriage to Philip Hand, with whom Laurel lived in Chicago. Like Chicago, Philip also represents a component of *Welty as writer*. As

¹³ For more comparisons between *One Writer’s Beginnings* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*, see Marrs, p. 232.

¹⁴ Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings, Welty: Stories Essays, and Memoir*, ed. by Richard Ford and Michael Kreyling, (New York: Library of American, 1998), pp. 839-948 (p. 924). Subsequent references to this work are from the same edition.

an architect, Philip symbolizes the place in which craft met passion for Welty, the beginning stages of her artistic life: 'He taught her to draw, to work toward and into her patterns, not to sketch peripheries' (*Optimist's*, p. 161). Philip Hand tells Laurel at one point, 'I get a moral satisfaction out of putting things together' (161). Hand, the name itself suggesting craft, literally builds spaces, much as Welty builds imaginative places in prose. Hand stands in for the work that Welty did as a developing writer. In short, Laurel's marriage to Philip Hand is Welty's marriage to the craft of her hands, writing. Welty emphatically uses both surnames, McElva and Hand, in Laurel's name, suggesting that Laurel is a Southerner *and* an artist.

Having established the link between Laurel and *Welty-as-writer*, we can now begin to work through the ways that we see the novel as a kind resignation, or retirement notice, to her readers. The novel explores death, ageing, and grief to an extent that we do not see in other Welty novels. This exploration is inextricably tied to the ageing and end of Welty's career. The primary death, around which the plot revolves, is Laurel's father's, Judge Clinton McElva. As mayor of Mount Salus, he is the center of Mount Salus and has reached an almost myth-like status to its residents. Even the Presbyterian Church where the funeral takes place has 'been built by McKelvas.'¹⁶ Some of the descriptions allude to the fact that Judge McElva might very well be Mount Salus itself. Lying on the bed in the hospital, he is a 'mound,' 'a house,' and a 'mountain' (*Optimist's*, pp.13, 32). A representative of myriad institutions, law, government, and church, he is the locus of Welty's oeuvre, the *South signified*. Embodied in Judge McElva are the 'central elements of Renaissance literature'¹⁷ as Mary Ann Wimsatt outlines:

A strong sense of the South as a distinctive region, a correspondingly strong sense of place or locale, a belief in a hierarchical system of social classes, a feeling of shared community springing from a keen awareness of class and region, and an abiding recognition of the influence of the past upon the present.¹⁸

It is interesting to note as well a connection between Judge McElva and the Agrarians, the animus of the Southern Renaissance. Besides being an educated, well-to-do southerner, the novel gives us other hints of his connection to the Agrarians. As Laurel recollects her father pruning in the back garden, she sees him 'holding the shears in both hands [as] he

¹⁶ Eudora Welty, *The Optimist's Daughter* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 88. All subsequent references come from this edition.

¹⁷ Mary Ann Wimsatt, 'Region, Time, Memory: *The Optimist's Daughter* as Southern Renaissance Fiction,' in Gretlund, Jan Norby, and others, eds, *The Late Novels of Eudora Welty* (Columbia: U of South Carolina Press, 1998), pp. pp. 134-44 (p. 135).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[performs] a sort of weighty saraband, with a lop for this side, then a lop for the other side, as though he were bowing to his partner' (*The Optimist's Daughter*, p. 6). His dancing and bowing to the tree 'as though...to a partner' suggests the intimate 'relationship of man to place'¹⁹ that the Agrarians tried to uphold. Furthermore, when Dr. Courtland realizes Judge McElva has died, he calls the Judge a 'renegade,' which might as well be Fugitive—Agrarian Fugitive—in this case (*Optimist's* 34). Judge McElva, we also learn, helped Dr. Courtland, who walks with a 'rather stately ploughboy's' gait, through medical school (*Optimist's* 11). The Judge's life has given vocation and identity to the other members of the community.²⁰ His death, then, represents not only the end of the McElvas, for Laurel has no children, but the end of the epoch of a specific kind of represented southern place for Welty.

It might bear mentioning that in Judge McElva we might find the Faulknerian influence critics have long seen in Welty's work. In a *Paris Review* interview, when asked about Faulkner's influence on her, Welty responded, 'It was like living near a big mountain, something majestic--it made me happy to know it was there, all that work of his life.'²¹ Might the mountain of Judge McElva represent the spirit of the Southern Renaissance tradition as found in Faulkner? Might it be an unconscious allusion to Faulkner's influence on Welty's life? Faulkner died in 1962, and the first draft of *The Optimist's Daughter* appeared in 1969. Since Welty's father died long before, in 1931, it is an interesting connection to entertain, especially as it provokes questions regarding her work as 'Faulknerian parody.'²² For much of her career, as Linda Kuehl pointed out, she has been asked 'how [she] could have written a word with William Faulkner living in

¹⁹ Allen Tate, 'The New Provincialism,' *Essays of Four Decades*, (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1969), pp. 535, 545, 544, in Bone, p. 20.

²⁰ Although the temptation, especially in my argument, is to categorize all of Welty's work as Southern Renaissance, I do not think that is a helpful approach. What is helpful is looking at both her previous novels, *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*, in order to establish that the backward glance was an integral part of Welty's vision. Whether or not she is a traditional Southern writer (and I make the argument in the next chapter that she is not), the fact that she set both of the previous novels in the past, depicting old folkways, economic systems, and traditions of the rural South, and then set *The Optimist's Daughter* within a milieu that juxtaposes the old with the new, suggests that *she* had, indeed, perceived these places within an old and new dichotomy.

²¹ Eudora Welty, interviewed by Linda Kuehl, *Paris Review*, Fall 1972, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4013/the-art-of-fiction-no-47-eudora-welty>, [accessed 17 May 2014].

²² Kreyling, Michael, *Inventing Southern Literature*, (Kindle Edition; Oxford: UP of Mississippi, 1998), p. 159.

Mississippi.²³ Her struggle to negotiate her place as a Southern writer (in Mississippi) in light of Faulkner, as both Welty and Kreyling²⁴ point out, has been an issue for her--whether great or small. When thinking about whether he has influenced her, she responded, 'It is hard to be sure about such things.'²⁵

If Judge McElva is the *South signified*, his death, then, is Yeats's announcement that the 'centre cannot hold.'²⁶ The novel shows us several ways that the animus of the Southern Renaissance is a thing of the past. Although Laurel's bridesmaid's parents 'still [live] within a few blocks of the McKelva house, the bridesmaids and their husbands [have] mostly all built new houses in the "new part" of Mount Salus. Their own children [are] father away still, off in college now' (*Optimist's*, p. 123). There has been a migration away from the Old, evidenced in the first order by the children of Judge McElva's generation moving to the new part of the city and, the second order, its children's children moving farther away to college. We see this separation between the old and new at the cemetery as well. Welty writes, 'Laurel would hardly have thought of Mount Salus Cemetery as having a "new part." It was like being driven to the other side of the moon' (*Optimist's*, p. 90). The new part, to add insult to injury, is 'on the very shore of the new interstate highway' (*Optimist's*, p. 91). Such a meditation on old and new is appropriate given Oates's comments on the extinction of Welty's chosen subject, which Winsatt's describes as consistent with the sensibilities of the Southern Renaissance. Welty, however, gains the upper hand by self-consciously including both, even if it is only to say goodbye to the world she has known through fiction.

Welty knew long before *The Optimist's Daughter* the struggle to represent the Southern Place. For instance, the differences between the modes of *The Optimist's Daughter* and her first novel, *Delta Wedding*—as I will discuss in the next chapter—are related to only degree, not kind; both novels disassemble the South. However, the indeterminacy of *The Optimist's Daughter* has more to do with vision. To use a general analogy: *Delta Wedding*, although it fragments a singular reading of the Southern Place,

²³ Eudora Welty, interviewed by Linda Kuehl, *Paris Review*, Fall 1972, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4013/the-art-of-fiction-no-47-eudora-welty>, [accessed 17 May 2014].

²⁴ Kreyling, *Inventing*, pp. 159-160.

²⁵ Eudora Welty, interviewed by Linda Kuehl, *Paris Review*, Fall 1972, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4013/the-art-of-fiction-no-47-eudora-welty>, [accessed 17 May 2014].

²⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming,' *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran, 2nd edn (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 187.

tries at the same time to piece it together, as the wedding in the title indicates. *The Optimist's Daughter*, however, shows Welty giving up on the possibility of the venture.

The greatest indication of this disruption to Southern discourse in *The Optimist's Daughter* is in the marriage of Wanda Fay to Judge Clinton McElva shortly before his death. It is easy to see Fay as Cleanth Brooks does: 'a human type to which the future may indeed belong: the rootless, finally amoral, individual whose insistence on self-aggrandizement is not countered by any claim of family or clan or country.'²⁷ Now as owner of the McElva house, Fay's entrance into the family and community challenges the social hierarchy of Mount Salus and their respect for the past.

Although the case can be made that Fay is grieving, not even that concession can excuse her from her crimes. The reader is even lead to believe she is responsible for the judge's death, a fact so apparent that Laurel thinks she could be charged with a crime (*Optimist's*, p. 130). Even without seeing his death take place, we know that the placeless, crude, disruptive, and narcissistic Fay is responsible for it. Fay here represents the antithesis of Welty's vision. Place has been both Welty's inspiration and source of knowledge, and Fay embodies the forces to which Welty loses this place. Her 'killing' the Judge, as a result, is appropriate, for Fay, as an embodiment of placelessness, is in no small part responsible for the death of Welty's imagined milieu. Fay might very well be the new generation of the South, for, as Yardley writes, 'Eudora Welty's generation is the last to know intimately the Southern land before the highways and quick-food joints took over, to know the Southern myth before it grew stale, to know the Southern family before it disintegrated.'²⁸

What we see in the text, then, is what Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, describes as a loss of faith 'in both the inexhaustibility and the power of existing representations.'²⁹ Because of the death of Judge McElva, Welty's perceived South must become parody because, as we see at the funeral, only second-hand stories about place remain. And, any of act parody, borrowing from a previous mode, is a self-conscious act because it draws attention to its forms as borrowed and 'artificial,' thereby pointing out the written nature of the text. It is through this self-consciousness she writes a narrative that is 'both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and powers of representation.'³⁰ Herein

²⁷ Brooks, p. 233.

²⁸ Yardley, p. 170.

²⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

lies the crux of the issue for Welty. The limits of her representations are evidenced by their possible extinction and irrelevance, as some critics said of *Losing Battles*, but the powers of her representations, as seen in this novel, allow her to create a narrative that handles both her extinction (as a result of Fay) and her awareness of that extinction (through Laurel), thereby reinstating her relevance within a postmodern milieu.³¹

Laurel's difficulty in accepting the new reality of Mount Salus must also be Welty's. Her reticence might account for what some scholars see as Laurel's passivity in the text. For much of the novel, Laurel is an onlooker. House calls Laurel, 'for most of the novel,' 'dull,' 'hollow,' and 'passive,' 'reluctant to engage,' 'without agency,' and 'shapeless.'³² For example, Laurel speaks to Mr. Dalzell only once in the hospital room when she says, 'This is too strong a light for my father,' referring to the outside light Mr. Dalzell has let into the room (*Optimist's*, p. 20). She observes and listens to Mr Dalzell's family in the waiting room but does not take part in the conversation, instead circling the room repeatedly while they speak (*Optimist's*, p. 36). She never directly addresses any of the Chisoms at the wake. After the funeral, as the women of Mount Salus gossip in the backyard, Laurel, in silence, '[gazes] at the ladies' but does not speak until Mrs Pease says, 'Cat's got her tongue' (*Optimist's*, p. 111-112).

This silence indicates not only Laurel's but also Welty's bewilderment at what unfolds in the novel. What Laurel, and, by extension, Welty, thinks she knows about the community—the *South represented*—seems incongruous with what the people around her know. When Laurel does speak, most of what she says is in opposition to what other people say. She tries to set right her vision of Mount Salus. As people reminisce about the Judge at the wake, for instance, she finds their memories of him different from her own and offers several rebuttals:

Father was delicate [...] I don't think that was Father [...] He hadn't any use for what he called theatrics...In the courtroom or anywhere else. He had no patience for show' [...] He's trying to make Father into something he wanted to be himself [...] Father really was modest [...] What's happening isn't real...what people are saying [...] They said he was a humorist. And a crusader. And an angel on the face of the earth [...] They're misrepresenting him—falsifying, that's what Mother would call it [...] He never would have stood for lies being told about him [...] The

³¹ This is the primary difference between *Delta Wedding*, which I explore in the next chapter, and *The Optimist's Daughter*. Although I argue both novels are self-conscious, *Delta Wedding* works to layer its self-consciousness. It is still hopeful at achieving a vision of the Southern Place. The Welty of *The Optimist's Daughter* has no such conceits.

³² House, p. 98.

least anybody can do for him is remember right. (*Optimist's*, pp. 74, 79, 80, 82, 83)

Laurel (Welty) is indignant because, on one level, they undermine her father (her South) and revise his life for their own purposes. Major Bullock and Dr. Courtland re-interpret the Judge's life through their imaginations, making him a 'humorist,' 'crusader,' and an 'angel on the face of the earth' (*Optimist's*, p. 83). The struggle here represents the reality of several imaginative accounts of what constitutes Place. Having the opposing narratives articulated and brought into the story dismays Welty. Her story of the South is dismantled into several stories, without an overarching metanarrative of the Place. As I will explore in the next chapter, this struggle, or even realization, was implicit in her first novel as well. The difference here is that the storied nature of the South becomes a part of the surface narrative rather than an embedded phenomenon as a result of self-consciousness or thematization.

This, in conjunction with Fay and the arrival of the Chisoms, exacerbates the tension. The people have formed their own discourses about him, shifting his 'essence' to the realm of subjectivity. Because we know very little of the Judge's actual life, the text never reconciles the different identities of the judge or offers a 'true vision' of him. The lack of a *Southern signified* is accentuated, as is Welty's struggle to realize the extent to which her *South imagined* is extinct. Hutcheon writes, 'With parody [...] the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question. This does not mean that art has lost its meaning and purpose, but that it will inevitably have a new and different significance.'³³ Laurel (Welty's) South, as a result of the judge's death, has been co-opted and re-imagined by several discourses. Even characters whom Welty has created do not agree about what, exactly, the South means. Laurel's (Welty's) voice is one among many, a recycling of older forms. A chasm has opened between Place and craft, so much so that Major Bullock disqualifies her from speaking because she has been away 'drawing pictures' (*Optimist's*, p. 80). It is as if, as a writer, representing place has somehow distanced her from her subject; the South is as foreign to her as Chicago is for Major Bullock.

Welty's struggle to read Place reaches a fever pitch while Laurel is out with the bridesmaids after the funeral. While they talk about her parents, Laurel says, 'Are they just figures from now on to make a good story?' (*Optimist's*, p. 127). Laurel's statement is ironic--although not to her. She privileges her own memory unaware that it, too, is a

³³ Hutcheon, p. 90.

story. She believes she has the ‘true’ and ‘real’ story, motivating her to reinforce, fight for, and protect it. Implicit in Laurel’s indignation is also a Romantic, self-referential exclamation from Welty about her fiction, a kind of refusal to accept her work as parody. It is not until the end of the novel that Laurel learns the ‘new and different significance’ of parody to which Hutcheon refers.³⁴ This occurs when Laurel tells Fay that in the breadboard exists ‘the whole story’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 178). She, too, like the bridesmaids here, accepts and utilizes the word ‘story,’ one among many, in order to communicate a truth that she has learned (*Optimist’s*, p. 127). By the end, Welty also realizes that it is better in the end to write an imagined place, even if no longer relevant, than to face the abyss of placelessness represented by Fay.

If the novel is a reflection on her novel writing career, it seems necessary for her past work to make an appearance. Her catalogue, after all, represents the spirit of her lost literature better than anything else. The self-consciousness of the narrative forces her to survey the *past South imagined* of her work. The novel becomes, through this process, a reunion of sorts, an assemblage of the various Southern characters of her career. While we do not see the same characters, at least by name, in terms of style and subject, many disparate parts of her career convene in the text. And, as we read the novel this way, we see a pattern emerge: Welty draws our attention to her old worlds and forms and then pulls us out through an admission of their artifice. This dichotomy between creating place and people and then pointing to the act of creation is the crux of Welty’s parodic struggle and is what ultimately facilitates Laurel’s and Welty’s exits from the novel and novel writing.

The Chisoms and the Dalzell’s are an example of this paradox of *South represented* and then *represented as representations*. Although neither family moves the plot forward, Welty has devoted long passages to their exchanges. In terms of plot, they are superfluous, background noise even. Despite the critics who claim that the plot of this novel is tight and simple, the comedic digressions that take place around the lower-class families hearken back to the meandering digressions of *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*. The text gives both the Chisoms and the Dalzells ample room to make their noise and brings them to the forefront as the protagonist wanders around them silently, taking a literal survey. The Dalzell’s in the novel play minor roles, as do the Chisoms. However, read as a novel about novel writing their peripheral places in the story make sense. We see both families as storied forces when Laurel connects the Dalzell’s to the Chisoms:

³⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

‘Fay had said they didn’t even exist, and yet it seemed to Laurel that she had seen them all before [...] They might have come out of that night in the hospital waiting room—out of all times of trouble, past or future—the great, interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 68, 84). The Chisom’s are familiar to Laurel because they remind her of the Dalzell’s and to Welty because she has spent a career writing both families. The same could be true of the Fairchilds in *Delta Wedding*. The sections in which the Chisoms and Dalzell’s interact are akin to this novel’s dialogue-heavy predecessor, *Losing Battles*. The Chisoms and Dalzell’s might very well be cut from the same mould as the Renfroe’s and Beecham’s of the previous novel.

We see Welty point to *characters-as-artifice* in more explicit ways as well. Mr. Dalzell, who shares the hospital room with Judge McElva, could have walked out of *Losing Battles* into *The Optimist’s Daughter*. He is ‘wearing [...] an old broadbrimmed black felt hat’ with ‘the peppering of red road dust’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 20). He mistakes Judge McElva for his son, and, gripped by delusion, prattles on about their history together. He says, ‘I might’ve known if you were did come home, you’d come home drunk,’ ‘I told you rascals not to let the fire out’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 20, 21, 23) and ‘I declare I want to see you load that gun before they start to coming’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 23). In the lengthy exchange between the Dalzell’s in the waiting room, we discover that Mr. Dalzell’s face ‘looks like [...] a piece of paper’ to his daughter (*Optimist’s*, p. 37). The gun-wielding, impoverished southerner, sharing the same imaginative spaces as the Judge McElva’s of Welty’s fiction, as he dies, is reduced to paper. He becomes, then, an artefact of Welty’s work. His face as paper is an obvious connection to his existence as a product of writing.

An exchange at the funeral communicates this tension as well. Dot Daggett tells Laurel, ‘It was old Mount Salus personified,’ which is ironic, given that the funeral is held in the new part (*Optimist’s*, p. 92). She looks at Laurel, however, with ‘movie-actress eyes,’ suggesting the irony is not lost on her and that this sentiment, ‘Mount Salus personified,’ might very well be a futile attempt at consolation (*Optimist’s*, p. 92). The phrase ‘movie actress eyes’ points to the extent to which she is also playing a constructed role in the text (*Optimist’s*, p. 92). She is simultaneously Welty’s *South represented* and a comment on the loss of the power of that representation. In the end, much like the Chisoms and Dalzell’s, she becomes explicitly identified as a product of Welty’s imagination.

In addition to characters, images highlight this dichotomy between representation and *representation as representation*. The first occurs on Laurels' train ride to Mount Salus just after her father's funeral:

Set deep in the swamp, where the black trees were welling with buds like red drops, was one low beech that had kept its last year's leaves, and it appeared to Laurel to travel along with their train, gliding at a magic speed through the cypresses they left behind. It was her own reflection in the windowpane—the beech tree was her head. Now it was gone. As the train left the black swamp and pulled out in the space of Pontchartrain, the window filled with a featureless sky over pale smooth water, where a seagull was hanging with wings fixed, like a stopped clock on a wall. (*Optimist's*, p. 45)

The 'one low beech [with] last year's leaves,' Laurel realizes, is her head (*Optimist's*, p. 45). What she imagines as landscape, and has imbued with preternatural qualities is rooted not in the actual but in the imagination of the writer. Place, the idealized magic of the *South represented* gives way to reality. 'Now it [is] gone' rings out as a moratorium on Welty's place-imagined (*Optimist's*, p. 45). Reflection and artistic inspiration made it into a magical tree with last year's leaves. But, as the scene transitions to the courthouse clock and she sees a 'featureless sky over pale smooth water, where a seagull [is] hanging with wings fixed, like a stopped clock on a wall' (*Optimist's*, p. 45), we see that this world, Welty's imaginative place, is still, quiet, and 'featureless' on the other side of the glass (*Optimist's*, p. 45). Without the animus of the Judge, there is nothing much to see. Isaac Rosenfeld, writing in 1943 about Welty's collection of stories, *The Wide Net*, claims that he sees in Welty's work 'artistic self-consciousness to the point of an exclusive preoccupation,' leading to 'an esthetic involution' in which 'the world is no longer the source and central point of her art [...] but has become an incidental background related to her writing only by the beauty it may occasionally share with her prose.'³⁵ What Rosenfeld saw early on her career reaches the final stage of its involution in this scene. It is, as he says, 'shot through with anxiety.'³⁶ He explains:

For the writer who exchanges centers with the world, focusing his attention on artistry, runs a great risk. There is the risk of incommunicability; the risk of the trivial; the risk of losing emotional reference, that human closeness which gives good writing the feeling of

³⁵ Rosenfeld, Isaac. "Consolations of Poetry." *New Republic*, 18 October 1943, pp. 525-26 in *Eudora Welty: The Critical Reviews*, ed. by Pearl Amelia McHaney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 43-44 (p. 44).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

standing on the brink of great discoveries. This anxiety is implicit in Eudora Welty's work.³⁷

While Welty's interest in the process of the artist were burgeoning as early as thirty years before, we see now the interest in it having exhausted Welty. Here, the focus rests on the artistry, and, as a result, the 'sky' is incommunicable, emotionally empty, and devoid of the potential for great discoveries, in a word, 'featureless' (*Optimist's*, p. 45).

The ominous chimney sweep that traps her in the house also illustrates the ways in which Place (mediated through the external world of the story) has become lifeless and stultifying. Like the bird, Welty has become captive by the imaginative world that she has 'built' around herself. Laurel discovers the next day, that, like her, the bird is 'trying to get out,' not invade the house (*Optimist's*, p. 165). Because Laurel (Welty) has not realized and accepted the fact that she needs to escape (step away from representation), she feels entrapped, suffocated, and stuck, just like the bird. The house and its contents are the sites wherein the writer meets and negotiates representation. The old house, the plantation desk, and her mother's letters all represent the hard surfaces of Place in the imagination. Like the bird, Laurel (Welty) '[touches,] [taps], [brushes] herself against the walls and closed doors, never resting' (*Optimist's*, p. 130).

Hiding from the bird, and the reality of their common predicament, Laurel faces again the extent to which the battle she faces against Fay is one waged over her father (and, for Welty, the South as grounded in Place) (*Optimist's*, p. 130). Here Laurel has not yet made a distinction between the place in which he lived, whether the old house or, more generally, Mount Salus, and her representations of that place in her memory. Allegorically, Welty has not yet accepted the reality of the tenuousness of the idea of Place, its lack of ontological grounding. As such, holding onto this place, this house, represents Welty not wanting to let go of the signifiers of the past. As she is trapped in the sewing room, Laurel remembers sitting

On [the] floor and [putting] together the fallen scraps of cloth into stars, flowers, birds, people,... lining them up, spacing them out, making them into patterns, families, on the sweet-smelling matting, with the shine of firelight, or the summer light, moving over mother and child and what they were both making. (*Optimist's*, p. 134)

From an early age, she had begun to 'put together' representations of an outward reality. The house, then, is a meeting place between *South represented* and craft for the writer. So much of who Laurel has become as an artist (Welty a writer) started here. When Laurel

³⁷ Ibid.

runs out into the yard and releases the chimney swift then stands in the driveway ‘burning her father’s letters to her mother, and Grandma’s letters, and the saved little books and papers’ she is transformed; the objects of her parents’ life can no longer ‘mean’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 169). There is nothing sentimental about the concrete artefacts of their life together. This is Welty showing the writer conceding to problems with representation and ultimately abandoning it.

The final stage of letting go occurs in her confrontation with Fay. For all of Fay’s rage, she is not a complicated figure. We see a much more complex vision of the Dalzell’s and Chisoms, who operate so little in the novel. Fay’s over-the-top narcissism begs to be seen as a fictional construction, just as the Dalzell’s, the Chisoms, and Dot Dagget. As an antagonist, she drives the narrative through her *unbelievability*. She stands in the way of Laurel, who has roots in Mount Salus, and Welty, who celebrates Mount Salus and has created it as a place to *mean*.

Kreyling sees Fay’s opposition to Laurel as the biggest obstacle to Laurel’s own reconciliation with the past and place, for Fay believes ‘life belongs to the living.’³⁸ For House, Fay represents a woman without a story and the one who prompts Laurel, in the end, to finally ‘tell’ her story in order to reconcile the past with herself.³⁹ Both ideas are useful here, especially in identifying the struggle between *Fay as a fiction* and *Welty as writer*.

Fay requires Welty to come to terms with the writer’s worst nightmare, that his or her work has been in vain, that it is meaningless, powerless, and useless. Fay’s relationship to the Judge and Mount Salus threatens Laurel’s (Welty’s) idea of the *past represented* even more than Dr. Courtland, Major Bullock, and the Bridesmaids. For Fay, as House points out, has no story and chooses not to signify or represent at all. She is a vacuum that threatens to obliterate the meaning of Welty’s work. As such, she is a necessary foil for Welty’s leaving the vocation as an artist who represents. For if Fay now inhabits the old version of the South, and Fay (dis)places the South, there is nothing left with which to work.

When Fay arrives at the end, Laurel finally confronts her, telling her that she has ‘desecrated [the] house’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 173). The breadboard that Philip had given her mother is scarred and burnt from Fay’s cigarettes. When Laurel tries to explain the significance of the breadboard, saying it represents ‘the whole story...the whole solid past,’ Fay responds, ‘Whose story? Whose past? Not mine...I belong to the future...’

³⁸ Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 210.

³⁹ House, p. 103-105.

(*Optimist's* p. 178). Although tempted to bash Fay over the head with the breadboard, Laurel sets it down, realizing nothing Fay can do can ultimately harm the place where the memories of that story exist. Fay enables Welty to see that, although she is leaving the world of representations she has built (the house, Judge McElva, Mount Salus, and the breadboard) her life lived through representations is not going anywhere. It is still as much a part of her as the breadboard is for Laurel. The memory of her art will remain a part of her, though the hard fictional surfaces of it she has left behind. Only in the face of a simple-minded person 'without any powers of passion or imagination... who had no way to see it or reach it in the other person' could provide such a monumental turn for Welty (*Optimist's*, p. 178). Rather than explain, or give an account for, 'the whole story' of her career, she lays down the breadboard and thinks that 'memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams' (*Optimist's*, p. 178, 179). The connection here to free hands is important because it is an explicit tie to my argument that this is the end of her career. She lays down the breadboard and has freed her hands (from writing).

It is no surprise, then, that after *The Optimist's Daughter*, her days of writing fiction, or at least publishing fiction, were over. Her interests turned, instead, to autobiography. She, like Laurel, laid down the breadboard and focused on her own life and her own memory rather than recycling fictional representations of place.⁴⁰

Briefly, it is important to discuss how this reading of the *novel-as-end* can help us to resituate Welty's work within a postmodern framework. I do not mean to suggest that her concerns are the same as other postmodern Southern writers, Dorothy Allison, Bobbie Ann Mason, or Harry Crews, for instance. While the old and new wage war in the novel, the novel does not cover the same ground as works published later in the same decade. Popular culture plays little to no role here. There are clear (and even oppressive) class distinctions in the novel. Unlike later southern novels, the main plot trajectory focuses more on the concerns of the white, upper-class southerner. However, to dismiss the novel as traditional Southern Renaissance overlooks the ways that Welty addresses critical concerns related to building imaginative spaces. She questions the modes of representation she has employed in her career and finally relents to the force and chaos of [dis]placement at the hands of multiple southern discourses. The struggles with the many Souths of the novel (or the lack of South in Fay) chronicle an unfolding realization that *South as signified* is gone. Any accusation of Welty as simply an anachronistic literary

⁴⁰ One can make the case, of course, that autobiography is a kind of fiction as well.

Agrarian are, in this novel, met and rebutted through Welty's self-conscious search to represent and make meaning of the South.

Chapter 2: Too Many Grooms at the Altar: Self-consciousness and Indeterminate Place in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*

If Welty's final novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*, reveals her frustration with depicting what she believed was *her* South, *Delta Wedding*--the unwieldy and sprawling story of the Fairchilds as they prepare for the wedding between Troy Flavin and Dabney Fairchild--reveals that even at the beginning of her novel-writing career her conceptualisations of the *South as Place* were problematic. At the novel's publication, the critics' attention was focused on what appears to be an anomalous fascination with past Place in Welty's longer work.¹ The problem, then as it is now to some critics' minds, lies in what seem to be Romantic notions of the Old South.² By and large they see *Delta Wedding* as a celebration of Agrarian sensibilities and the plantation economies of the Old South. However, Kreyling and others have pointed out how self-consciousness points to the fact that the novel might in fact also be a novel about writing novels.³ Using the same argument I introduced in the previous chapter, I want to build upon both Kreyling's idea of the novel as self-conscious--and previous explorations of how the novel operates to critique and reinforce Southern discourses--in order to suggest that Welty reveals that what Diane Trilling calls the 'narcissistic southern fantasy' in the novel is just that--fantasy--and, in so doing, enforces its fictive role in the cultural reproduction of Southern place.⁴ Rather than acting only (or simply) as a nostalgic glance at a lost way of life, Welty can be read to disrupt and subvert the fantasy. I will argue that in *Delta Wedding* Laura McRaven is *Welty-the-novelist* attempting the long form novel, standing on the outside, not only of the Mississippi Delta plantation, her chosen imaginative place, but also the novel itself. As a result, the borders of her imagined South are never demarcated, geographically or ideologically. There are, instead, several 'Souths' at work in the novel, sometimes (most times) working against each other. In

¹ Kreyling writes, 'Welty's famous short stories, many of the dissenting reviewers [of *Delta Wedding*] wrote, gave us the "new South," a "real South," a South in keeping with their image of it as a backwater with a lush exotic setting and grotesque people with outlandish names and defects. Now that Welty had written a novel, the reasoning went, she should have treated this South in more depth.' *Achievement*, p. 53.

² Bone, p. 39.

³ *Understanding*, p. 107.

⁴ Trilling, p. 61.

other words, by standing in front of the readers,⁵ she reveals that it is *only* the imagination that constructs Place in her fiction and even, by extension, the very notion of a South in reality. The Southern fantasy, then, extends to include not only the aristocratic plantation lifestyle of the Fairchilds but also *any* consistent narrative about Place. After establishing Welty's self-conscious approach, the essay explores the novel in two phases: the ways that Welty struggles to conceptualise physical place and her characters' relationships to it, both its history and its present reality and, then, the ways that competing discourses about the socioeconomic realities of her South compete for precedence and ultimately fail.

Part of the reason for Welty's self-conscious approach is the inauspicious starting point of her novel-writing career. As Michael Kreyling Suzanne Marrs have laid out in prior studies of the text's evolution, the novel *Delta Wedding* started in 1943 as a short story titled 'Delta Cousins.'⁶ The story shares some similarities with the novel, chief among them the character of Laura and her explorations of the Shellmound plantation.⁷ The story was motivated, Marrs believes, by the stories Welty had heard about the Delta from her close friend and native of the Delta region, John Robinson.⁸

She sent the story to her agent and friend, Diarmuid Russell, who told her the story was chapter two of a novel.⁹ Welty, however, despised the novel form. On one occasion, she had written Russell a plea to spare her from such an endeavor: 'Please do not tell me that I will have to write a novel. I do not see why if you enjoy writing short stories and cannot think in the form of a novel you should be driven away from it and made to slave at something you do not like and do badly.'¹⁰ Kreyling believes Welty's reticence to write a novel was a result of her struggle to write a book 'about something'—a deductive approach to narrative—when her approach had largely been informed by a 'personal' and 'inductive' creative process.¹¹

After leaving an internship for the *New York Times Book Review*, she returned to Mississippi where she again visited, at the behest of Russell, the Delta region.¹² In a letter, he told her to peruse diaries in the region in order to find out as much as she could about the history of the place and the stories of its people in hopes that it would help her

⁵ Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 84.

⁶ Michael Kreyling, 'Historical Approach,' pp. 77-97.

⁷ Marrs, pp. 86-87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁹ Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 82.

¹⁰ Eudora Welty interview from 1940, Kreyling, *Late Novels*, p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² Marrs, p. 83.

revise 'Delta Cousins' into a novel.¹³ She did, paying particular attention to a journal by Nancy Robinson, an ancestor of John Robinson, and by 1946, the novel, *Delta Wedding* was finished.¹⁴

It was both these visits to the Delta, as Marrs points out, and her reading of Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House and Other Stories* while she worked for the *New York Times Book Review*, as Kreyling points out, that allowed her to reconcile her concerns about technique and plot with her personal approach to fiction.¹⁵ Kreyling writes,

One of the pieces in Woolf's collection, 'An Unwritten Novel,' showed Welty how to complete her own struggling novel. The crucial insight is both technical and psychological: point of view—contrary to the realistic rule—need not be unified in one central consciousness, and the membrane between one human consciousness and another is not a thick rind but permeable tissue.¹⁶

This realization helped her conceptualise a different kind of novel, one that 'spends less time actually telling the story than orchestrating the telling by several female presences.'¹⁷ However, such a move, one that drew attention away from story and toward the writer, meant that, 'as a novelist, Welty was out in front of her readers.'¹⁸

Welty's place 'in front of her readers' might be the reason some critics have found the novel 'woefully dull.'¹⁹ To an extent, at times we are acutely aware of the constructed nature of the text. The shifts between consciousness, from Laura to Ellen, or from Shelly to Dabney, the quick entrances and exits of myriad characters, and the short lines of dialogues, the sources of which are not always easily identifiable, all take the reader away from the movement of the *prose as narrative* and place it on the *prose as technique*. It is not hard to wonder at Welty's humour or her deft and inspired descriptions of people and places. But, as a result, the competence of her craft takes precedence over anything that happens, which is, perhaps, exactly what she wanted. If the reader does not pay the same kind of attention to the world that Welty invokes that she paid in constructing it, he or she might easily go missing in the 'permeable tissue'²⁰ between the consciousnesses of the

¹³ Marrs, p. 84.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 84 and Kreyling p. 83.

¹⁶ Kreyling, *Understanding*, 83

¹⁷ Ibid., 84-85.

¹⁸ Kreyling, *Understanding*, 84.

¹⁹ Helen Butler, Best Sellers, June 15, 1946, pp. 61-62 in *Eudora Welty: The Critical Reviews*, ed. by Pearl Amelia McHaney, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 66-67 (63).

²⁰ Kreyling, *Understanding*, 83.

characters. Laura's thought that it [is] so hard to read at Shellmound [because] there [is] so much going on in real life" (*Delta*, p. 143) might be better recast as 'it is so hard to read [...] Shellmound,' an acknowledgment of the dizzying effect that her approach has on the reader (*Delta*, p. 143).

However, while both her reticence to write a novel and her newfound stylistic approach might account for the fragmentation of Place in the narrative, I believe, instead, they are products of the difficulty of making the 'reader see only one of the pictures--the author's--under the pleasing illusion that it is the world's' ('Place,' p. 789). In other words, Welty had to negotiate how to give the reader a believable past South, one that she could pass off as the 'world's' South of the 1920's. As a result of trying to conceptualise the past South, already only representational and removed from 'the world' by time, the author's picture makes conspicuous the process of trying to pass off her picture as the world's. Therefore, the struggle to depict the past and to conjure a Place that seems realistic and whole becomes thematized on the pages of the novel.

We see this thematization mostly clearly--though not explicitly--through the young Laura McRaven. It is bemusing that Welty, although she had little experience of the Delta Wedding region as a child,²¹ would decide, as John Crowe Ransom correctly assumes, to place a character in the novel to stand in for herself.²² In an interview, Welty said, 'In the case of *Delta Wedding* I chose the twenties--when I was more the age of my little girl [Laura in the novel], which was why I thought best to have a child in it.'²³ But, what is the purpose of Welty inserting a representative of herself in the novel? The circularity of her explanation does not help us understand. Did she put Laura in the novel because it was set in the 1920's, when she was the same age as Laura, or did she set the

²¹ When asked about whether she was familiar with the plantation life depicted in the novel, Welty replied, 'No, but I had some friends who came from there, and I used to hear their stories, and I used to be taken on picnics and visits there. Family visits.' Eudora Welty, interviewed by Linda Kuehl, *Paris Review*, Fall 1972, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4013/the-art-of-fiction-no-47-eudora-welty>, [accessed 17 May 2014].

²² John Crowe Ransom writes, 'Her reader will probably identify it as the time of her childhood--if ignorant of the biographical data on Miss Welty as I am--and the child Laura, who is one of the precocious juvenile reporters in fiction, as herself; and he might even conclude that there was no strategic conception behind this novel other than that Miss Welty was nostalgic for a kind of life that already had passed beyond recognition, and had to go back to it in imagination.' 'Delta Fiction,' *Kenyon Review*, 8 (Summer 1946), pp. 503-07 in *Eudora Welty: The Critical Reviews*, ed. By Pearl Amelia McHaney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 62-65 (p. 64).

²³ Eudora Welty, interviewed by Linda Kuehl, *Paris Review*, Fall 1972, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4013/the-art-of-fiction-no-47-eudora-welty>, [accessed 17 May 2014].

novel in the 1920's because she wanted to have a child to represent her? Either way, having a child to represent her cannot be for nostalgia's sake or to tell the story of childhood.²⁴ Welty had no personal, childhood connection to the Delta. Either explanation, although the previous explanation seems to make the most sense, suggests that a young, imagined Welty in the Delta is *only* an imagined Welty, with no correlative in her memory or family history. And, an imagined Welty embodied in the young Laura, because she cannot represent Welty's actual childhood, must stand in for Welty in allegorical fashion. From what I have argued in the previous chapter, the connection makes sense. Although not explicit, when juxtaposed with *The Optimist's Daughter*, the allegory comes into focus. Laura McRaven in *Delta Wedding* and Laurel McElva in *The Optimist's Daughter* are cut from the same imaginative cloth, even down to the similarities between their names.²⁵

Laura as *Welty-the-novelist* works to show that Welty is unfamiliar with the territory: the novel form, her new method, and a past and place that she did not know firsthand. Such a distance, measured in both time and experience, places Welty outside of the action, much like the young Laura. She is naturally an outsider, both in the plot—as someone from Jackson and distanced from the Fairchild's plantation—and in the technical formation of the novel. Welty, like Laura,

Hesitated just a little in every doorway. Jackson was a big town, with twenty-five thousand people, and Fairchilds was just a store and a gin and a bridge and one big house, yet she was the one who felt like a little country cousin when she arrived, appreciating that she had come to where everything was dressy, splendid, and over her head. Demoniacally she tried to be a part of it—she took a breath and whirled, went ahead of herself everywhere, then she would fall down a humiliated girl.²⁶

What can account for Laura and, by proxy, Welty, feeling overwhelmed? Welty, like Laura, was from Jackson, and was unfamiliar with the world of the Delta. Having to

²⁴ Although the autobiographical comparison breaks down in *The Optimist's Daughter*, it still operates to a greater extent than it does in *Delta Wedding*.

²⁵ Juxtaposing Laura's first scenes in *Delta Wedding* and Laurel's in *The Optimist's Daughter* highlights the changes of Welty's perception of place and craft. The myriad stories of the South in *Delta Wedding* ultimately lead to the realization in *The Optimist's Daughter* that there are too many Souths to fathom. We see this change in perception attenuated through a change in technique. Whereas the prose in *Delta Wedding* is florid and teeming with energy, in *The Optimist's Daughter*, it is cold, understated, and straightforward.

²⁶ Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding*, in *Eudora Welty: The Complete Novels*, ed. by Richard Ford and Michael Kreyling (New York: Library of America, 1998), p. 142. Subsequent quotations from *Delta Wedding* come from this edition and are given in parenthesis after quotations in the text.

expand her Place into novel form would demand a focus we know she was reluctant to give. Not only that, the way of life of the plantation, by the 1940s already well in the past, required her to largely invent conceptualisations of the place, regardless of the journals she had at her disposal. It was a new venture in both technique and subject. The novel form and depicting a milieu with which she was not familiar ultimately transform Welty into a child who both ‘whirls’ and goes ‘ahead of herself everywhere’ as she tries ‘to be a part of it,’ and also, like Laura, one who fears she will ‘fall down a humiliated girl’ (Delta, p.142).

From the opening scenes, the reader can identify competing discourses about Place. As Laura rides the Yellow Dog into the Delta, a natural paradise unfolds around her:

A breeze blew through, hot and then cool, fragrant of the woods and yellow flowers and of the train. The yellow butterflies flew in at any window, out at any other, and outdoors one of them could keep up with the train, which then seemed to be racing with a butterfly. [...] Thoughts went out of [Laura’s] head and the landscape filled it. In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky. The clouds were large—larger than horses or houses, larger than boats or churches or gins, larger than anything except the fields the Fairchilds planted.’ (Delta, pp. 91-92)

It is no wonder critics have been quick to categorize the novel as a celebration of plantation life. It seems that the cotton fields are the largest feature of the Delta, and they shimmer ‘like the lighted wing of a dragonfly’ (Delta, p. 92). Not only that, the planter economy and the industrialized elements of the Delta seem to be a natural part of the landscape. In the distance Laura sees a ‘black mule [...] in the diamond light of far distance, going into the light, [and] a child [driving] a black mule home’ (Delta, p. 92). It is ‘diamond light’ that illuminates the servant, and, further, the boy driving the mule seems ancillary to the mule (Delta, p. 92). Furthermore, the train races the butterflies, the cotton gin looks ‘like a blue lake,’ and the train station is the colour of ‘goldenrod’ (Delta, pp. 91-93). The industrialized elements of the Delta are as natural as nature itself. Welty’s descriptions here seem carried over from the Natchez Trace novella that she wrote previously, *The Robber Bridegroom*, which showed her using fairy-tale conventions in a Southern setting. And, indeed, the flitting butterflies, the mention of the dragonfly wing, and the caterpillar train all make Laura’s trip into the Delta quite a fantasy.²⁷ Passages like these contribute to the idea that the novel celebrates an outdated

²⁷ In *The Optimist’s Daughter*, the reader does not see Laurel’s arrival to New Orleans to tend to her dying father. Rather than a train with open windows, we find Laurel in a

Agrarian sensibility, a place alive with natural wonder and seemingly untouched by land speculators or industrialization, or even cognizant of the dark underpinnings that keep the economy thriving.²⁸

As much as the above descriptions obscure the distinctions between the economies of the land and the land and its people, several elements work to challenge this reading. The train ride through the Delta crosses the Yazoo River, which means ‘river of death’ (*Delta* p. 283). The air in the train is ‘sooty’ (*Delta* p. 91), and the ‘Delta buzzards [...] [seem] to wheel as wide and high as the sun’ (*Delta* p. 92). Death hangs high over the Delta. Once Laura arrives, the city Fairchilds looks ‘like a row of dark barns’ (*Delta* 93). To Barbara Sylvester, the train ride ‘[foreshadows] the continuing decline and eventual transformation of the Delta cotton business in the twentieth century, a transformation already taking shape in 1923.’²⁹

Welty’s vision of the bustling plantation life in the Delta is also undermined in her depictions of Marmion, the house that Laura will one day rightfully own. Laura and

‘windowless room,’ and the first description of the world outside the hospital is brief: ‘There was a sharp, cold wind blowing through Canal Street’ (*Optimist’s*, pp. 11, 30). The physical description of Laurel also points to a pronounced contrast, both in style and in its depiction of the character’s respective place in life. The short clauses, the vague detail, and the straightforward reporting, on one hand, work to construct the solemn reason for Laurel’s homecoming. But, as I have argued previously, the homecoming is also allegorical, charting Welty’s last effort at representing the imagined South. As such, the striking contrast between this passage and Laura’s in *Delta Wedding* is appropriate. The imagined South in *The Optimist’s Daughter* is no longer a place of possibility, teeming with the energy of nature. It is, instead, a windowless room, and Laurel (Welty’s) eyes look ‘sleepless’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 3).

²⁸ That the landscape has the power to fill Laura’s imagination in *Delta Wedding* is also significant when comparing it to *The Optimist’s Daughter*. After Judge McElva dies, Laurel rides the train back to Mount Salus, like Laura to Fairchilds, where she thinks she sees ‘one low beech [traveling] along with [her] train,’ just as Laurel sees the butterflies flitting in out of the windows of the train (*Optimist’s*, p. 45). However, unlike Laura, for whom nature is able to fill the imagination, Laurel realizes the one low beech is not a tree at all but, rather, her head. Once she realizes this, as I point out in the previous chapter, beyond the window nothing is left but a ‘featureless sky over pale smooth water, where a seagull [is] hanging with wings fixed, like a stopped clock on a wall’ (*Optimist’s*, p. 45). Whereas in *Delta Wedding*, Welty, through Laura, delights in the wonder of nature, taking in the energy all around, and staring at the large, beautiful clouds, a sky quite full of features--large animals even--the Welty of *The Optimist’s Daughter*, through Laurel, sees a static and featureless sky, realizing that where once nature, or her representations thereof, could fill her imagination, her powers are spent and her view returns only a mirror of her own head, her imagination. It is a hall of mirrors. For without her *South represented*, she is powerless to represent. While her gift with language remains, her subject, fragmented and obfuscated by its multiple iterations, does not.

²⁹ Barbara Sylvester, ‘The Delta Wedding Blues’, in *Eudora Welty’s Delta Wedding*, ed. by Bouton Reine Dugas (Amsterdam: Dialogue, volume 4, 2008), pp. 4-27 (p. 18).

Roy's voyage by boat to the old house is a stark contrast to the life of Shellmound. So much so that, through Laura, Welty must ask, 'Is it still the Delta in here?' (for the Delta might as well be Fairchilds or the Shellmound Plantation) (*Delta*, p. 265). When they arrive, 'there [is] a dead mockingbird on the steps' (*Delta*, p. 264). Welty writes, 'The porch was covered with leaves, like the river, and there were loose, joggling boards in it. The door was open' (*Delta*, p. 264). The house and the river are parallels, at least to the extent that they both represent death. Welty writes, 'Out of the tower's round light at the top, down by a chain that looked the size of a spider's thread, hung the chandelier with its flower-shaped head covered with clusters of soft and burned-down candles, as though a great thing had sometime happened there' (*Delta* 264). If in Welty's imagination there are houses like Shellmound still thriving on the economies of the Old South, there are also houses derelict and abandoned like Marmion. That this is the house Laura owns, although unbeknownst to her, is also significant. It might well be that Marmion is actually Shellmound, but the hollowed out and abandoned version of it in 1946, the imaginative place from where Welty writes. The writing of *Delta Wedding*, then, is Welty's visit to Marmion. It is worn and abandoned by time, but she must somehow give it life, to take it across the river of death and populate it with history and people, to make 'a great thing [happen] there' (*Delta*, p. 246). The doubling of Shellmound we see in Marmion is a disruption of the Southern Narcissistic fantasy because it points to the death and decay of the Old South's social strata. When 'Aunt Studney sound[s] [...] a cry high and threatening like the first note of a song at a ceremony, a wedding or a funeral...' (*Delta*, p. 265), it is hard to imagine the cry, or any *threatening* cry, suited for both a wedding and a funeral. Herein we find a doubling of the hub of the novel: it is both a beginning and an end, both a celebration of union and a cry of grief at the end of the union. It is both Shellmound and Marmion at work in Welty's imagination as she negotiates the oppositions.

Even if Welty brings life to the plantation through the Shellmound house, however, death stands waiting. Barbara Sylvester sees the 'decline of the traditional cotton business [...] underway visibly in the houses of Shellmound,' citing such 'details as the "outdated" look of Shellmound's interior, and the fact that the exterior "needs a coat of paint."' ³⁰ Cecilia Donohue sees the 'neglected greenhouse' and the 'stable wall elbow-deep in a vine pointing' to a deterioration of the Fairchild identity. ³¹ Perhaps the most obvious foreshadowing of their demise is the bird-in-the-house episode (*Delta*, p.

³⁰ Sylvester, p. 19.

³¹ Donohue, p. 84.

248, 257). As Roxie, the black servant, tells the reader, the brown thrush is, quite literally, 'death' (*Delta*, p. 248). The ominous proclamation, coming from one of the black servants is appropriate and cuts to the heart of exactly what is dying—a subject about which I will write more later. The family ignores Roxie's superstitious comment in theory but not in practice. While they do not think the bird means death (they do not 'think' like Roxie), they still erupt in hysteria. Later, Little Battle says, 'I didn't think we was going to catch it, but Orrin caught it with Papa's hat and batted it to the wall' (*Delta*, p. 257). Instead of letting the bird out, as Laurel does in *The Optimist's Daughter*, the family thinks it best to kill it. Perhaps the desperation can be likened to their own desperation at the dissolution of their way of life, in a way 'killing their own death,' a circular and futile project.

Ultimately, however, Welty, just like Laura, never has a clear sense of where Shellmound is. When Laura asks later, 'Is all of this Shellmound?' we see Welty struggling to draw borders around the place (*Delta*, p. 329). Where her imaginative place begins and ends is abstracted. The central location of the novel lacks a geographical referent. Not knowing where Shellmound begins or ends disrupts its function as Place in the novel and leaves it suspended, nebulous, and without a parallel. The only grounding of Place exists within the physical, human-made structures: 'Fairchilds was just a store and a gin and a bridge and one big house' (*Delta*, p. 142). But, even the house has an 'undeterminate number of rooms' (*Delta*, p. 96). That the place is unchartable does not matter to the Fairchilds. When Laura says that the Yazoo River is 'the same river [that flows through] Memphis and New Orleans [...], in the great confines of Shellmound[,] no one listen[s]' (*Delta*, p. 329). Their interest is not in the places that surround the plantation that give it its shape. Instead, they are wholly focused on themselves. Their ignorance keeps them believing that *they* draw the borders that define Place, that surrounding territories have no bearing on demarcating their own. Furthermore, the confines are 'great,' though the reader never knows the extent to which these confines stretch out into the greater world of the Delta—if they even consider the rest of the Delta a separate Place at all (*Delta*, p. 329). Equally, then, Welty must struggle as Laura to try and locate a place that cannot be located through geography. Welty's presence through Laura obscures the boundaries of her own creation.

Welty's struggle to place the Fairchilds in time and Place are dramatised through Laura's perceptions of the family as well. At one point in the novel Laura imagines the Fairchilds as tropical birds in a great bowerlike cage: 'The sparkle of motion was like a rainbow, while it was the very thing that broke your heart, for the birds that flew were

caged all the time and could not fly out' (*Delta*, p. 103). The doubling is obvious; the Fairchilds are both beautiful and exotic, animals to be 'regarded' but caged in all the same, both by their own myopic conceptualisations of the bigger world and by time, which has rendered them extinct.

However, the other voices in the novel, though they seem on the surface a part of the life of the Plantation, are also quite removed. None of the other four characters from whose point of view the story is told seems to be fully complicit or involved in the life of the Fairchilds. Shelly wants to leave; Ellen is from West Virginia and has never really felt like the others; Robbie, George's wife, stands on the outside as a result of her working class background. Even Dabney, who, for all intents and purposes seems to be the closest to a 'true' Fairchild, despises them and even chooses someone from a poor background to marry. There is not a single narrative about the family, even from within the family itself, and, taken as a whole, the primary focus of the story is an extension of Welty's own relationship to the Delta: that of the outsider trying to place herself within the action. In this way, each of the characters shares a part in Welty's imaginative disenfranchisement from Place. Whom, then, does Welty see as the birds in the cage? Are perhaps only the men the caged ones of the Plantation life? Even George, Dabney thinks, 'love[s] the world, [...] not them in particular' (*Emphasis Welty's Delta*, p. 125). Through Laura's subjectivity, we see this struggle to both unite with the family and a realization of its fragmentation through a children's game:

It was funny how sometimes you wanted to be in a circle and then you wanted out of it in a rush. Sometimes the circle was for you, sometimes against you, if you were It. Sometimes in the circle you longed for the lone outsider to come in—sometimes you couldn't wait to close her out. It was never a good circle unless you were in it, catching hands, and knowing the song. (*Delta*, p. 161)

Sometimes she wants to flutter around with the caged exotic birds; sometimes she prefers freedom; sometimes she feels separated from them, obviously because of time, but also because of ideological difference. Welty, quite literally in this case, cannot quite get her arms around 'it,' to join the Fairchild circle. The problem lies in the fact that there is no 'it' around which her arms can go.

The story of George and Maureen on the railroad trestle further disrupts the reading of Place. If the Yellow Dog episodes, as Kreyling believes, 'testify to Welty's self-conscious plan to negate realistic, progressive narrative,'³² they also reveal the extent to which conceptualisations of the South depend on varied subjectivities. In the story,

³² Kreyling, *Understanding*, p. 88.

George, Robbie, Maureen, and the rest of the family (except Ellen and Battle) are walking along the railroad track when the Yellow Dog comes through. Maureen, whom we are led to believe has some sort of mental disability, gets her foot caught in the track. All except George and Maureen jump off the track to safety. The conductor stops the train in the nick of time. Everyone who offers an account of the incident in the novel, however, reads the story differently. Upon the first recounting, Orrin's, Welty writes, "'Here's the way it was'"--For all of them told happenings like narrations, chronological and careful, as if the ear of the world listened and wished to know surely' (*Delta*, p. 107). Seen through Orrin's eyes, it is cause and effect, one event leading to the other, without symbolic significance. Shelly, however, sees the incident 'like a painting in a schoolroom with colors vivid and thunderclouded' (*Delta*, p. 175), a sharp contrast to action-oriented sequence Orrin recounts. Shelly's vision also works against the authorial voice's claim that the family tells happenings 'like narrations' (*Delta*, p. 107). The moment is a frozen image in Shelly's mind. India has the most colourful version of the events, repeatedly using the phrase 'creep creep' and dramatizing the action (*Delta*, p. 148). In her version, Pinchy yells 'like a banshee from way up in a tree' and Maureen '[catches] her foot good' (*Delta*, p. 149). When told to hurry, India switches her narrative technique: 'Well Maureen and Uncle George kind of wrestled with each other and both of them fell off, and anyway the Dog stopped in plenty time, and we all went home and Robbie was mad at Uncle George. I expect they had a fight all right. And that's all' (*Delta*, p. 149). Perhaps the most affecting version is Robbie's, who reads George's action on the trestle as disregard for her and affirmation of his greater love for the Fairchilds. He would just as soon have died to save Maureen than to think of Robbie's safety or her future. The other versions of the story paint George as a hero and even suggest that the Fairchilds have enough respect to stop a train. The conductor does not complain when he does so, a moment echoed when Shelly drives parallel to the tracks later in the novel. The fact that this episode works as a story within a story points both to the impossibility of any one narrative (or narrative technique) about the Fairchilds having prominence over any other. It is interesting that one of the primary narratives of the family, decentralised through the subjectivities of several characters, is not a part of Laura's experience: twice she says she was not present when it happened, once expressing gratitude for her absence ('I'm glad I wasn't there') and once to correct someone ('Oh no, I wasn't there') (*Delta*, pp. 107, 149). If Laura represents Welty in the text, and the story to which the Fairchilds return in order to understand themselves is a story that Welty (through Laura) does not experience or craft firsthand, her story, then, is even further removed from Place.

The night light further decentralises the varied conceptualisations of the characters' relationships to Place. The novel might have us think that the night light represents the storied past of the Fairchilds. Aunt Primrose relates its significance to the family history. Years before, it was a source of comfort to Mashula Fairchild while her husband, a George from a different generation, fought in the Civil War. It is a complicated symbol, evoking the pain and loss inflicted on the Fairchilds during the Civil War and also the resilience and hope of the Fairchilds in the war's aftermath. The reader is made to feel for Mashula and to view the object as a reminder of both death and life held together. This section leads us to believe the night light is rife with signification for Aunt Jim Ellen and Aunt Primrose. Giving the night light to Dabney, the bride to be, is a continuation of the Fairchild narrative, specifically the devotion of wives to husbands, the sacredness of duty, and the importance of family past.³³ It also, however, illuminates other, less flattering, perspectives. Dabney thinks, 'All the Fairchilds [are] indulgent—indulgence [is] what she [can't] stand. The night light!' (*Delta*, p. 135). Although Dabney pretends she appreciates the object, she internally dismisses it as evidence of the Fairchilds' tendency to indulge family members. Dabney's sister, India, wonders if Dabney will 'take it on her honeymoon' and even imagines she's holding it as she and Dabney ride away from aunt Primrose (134, 136). It is a source of wonder for young India, full of the possibilities. In India's hand, the imagined night light 'seem[s] filled with the mysterious and flowing air of night' (136). However, India is the youngest one in the scene, the one with the least amount of experience as a Fairchild. Later, Dabney drops 'the little night light, and it [breaks] and its pieces [scatter]' (*Delta*, p. 141). Welty writes,

They heard that but no cry at all—only the opening and closing of the screen door as she went inside... India ran up to Uncle George and flung herself against his knees and beat on his legs. She could not stop crying, though Uncle George himself stayed out there holding her and in a little began teasing her about a little old piece of glass that Dabney would never miss. (*Delta*, p. 141).

It is shocking when Dabney drops it while running up the stairs to see Troy and leaves the scattered pieces behind without even stopping to regard them. We read it as an act of thoughtlessness, just as we are led to read much of Dabney's encounters with the family. She seems to disregard the past and has no need for it or for sentimentality. In this regard she has a striking similarity to Fay in *The Optimist's Daughter*. However, later, Shelly

³³ Gretlund also sees the night light as representative of the family history. He does not, however, deconstruct the significance of the night light as I do later. Jan Nordby Gretlund, *Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), p. 111.

finds Dabney crying and believes it is because she had broken the night light (*Delta*, p. 282). Shelly tells the reader Dabney breaking the night light is representative of the extent to which Dabney's marriage to Troy breaks the Fairchild tradition. If true, Dabney's weeping makes the history of the Fairchilds stultifying, classist, and, ultimately, oppressive. When Aunt Primrose says, 'I'd let George build Jim Allen and me a little house quick as anything. [...] And furniture, there's enough beds and all in the attic for a world of houses here' (334), India responds with what seems to be a non-sequitur: 'Your night light will be all gone [...] Dabney broke it for good, carrying it away' (*Delta*, p. 334). Read symbolically, however, India's response is not a non-sequitur. The 'world of houses' to which Aunt Primrose refers is the world of the Fairchilds, the Place, embodied in the night light. Even so, the realization that this world is broken should effect a more significant response; she ignores it altogether (*Delta*, p. 334). Given what we read about Aunt Primrose in other places in the novel, her silence is uncharacteristic. Maybe in the silence we read grief that cannot be expressed—or maybe even acceptance. But, the ambiguity leaves open the possibility that the night light was never quite as important as the aunts suggest. Even George, who's lineage is directly connected to the story of the night light and for whom the 'old stories, family stories, Mississippi stories, [are] the same as very holy or very passionate,' does not seem to care about the object (*Delta*, p. 281). He dismisses Dabney's carelessness with laughter. The signification of the night light, operating in the past and present, compressing hope and death, change and immutability, and familial responsibility and irresponsibility, is destabilized. Whether it matters, to whom it matters, and for what reasons are all issues obscured by the varying subjectivities that perceive the object. Excepting India, none of them regards the night light—or the family history—in the same way twice. The struggle to regard is not only a struggle to understand these people, their relationships to Place—both apathies and affections—and their histories within the place, but, for Welty, a struggle to construct those relationships.

Interestingly, Welty uses the same night light as an analogy of Place in her famous essay 'Place in Fiction.' Welty explains that the glass night light represents the artist's relationship between place and theme:

A lamp I knew of was a view of London till it was lit; but then it was the Great Fire of London, and you could go beautifully to sleep by it. The lamp alight is the combination of internal and external, glowing at the imagination as one; and so is the good novel. Seeing that these inner and outer surfaces do lie so close together and so implicit in each other, the

wonder is that human life so often separates them, or appears to, and it takes a good novel to put them back together ('Place,' p. 784).

For Welty, the external, the scene of London, is technique, what she thinks of as a kind of grounding principle, a way 'to base validity on point of origin' ('Place,' p. 784). The internal is theme, wherein the reader finds explorations of the human experience. What ultimately gives life to, or, in this case, lights the outward style and technique is the thematic scope of the novel. However, if the night light represents Place in fiction, might it shattering on the porch represent the difficulty in keeping Place together within the imagination? Is it, once again, a symbol of Welty's fear that this is not a good novel or an admission of the impossibility of seeing Place singularly, as the night light, self-contained and representative of a large city, represents? I believe so. The night light cannot stay precious. It is a precarious object that attempts to carry the weight of the Fairchilds past and that past's bearing on the present. It is, essentially, like Marmion, a doubling of the imaginative world. In its collapse we see the allegorical collapse of a united storied Place within the text.

In order to fully discuss Place in the novel, we must move from the symbolic dimensions of Place to the economic and social realities of Place at work in the imaginative scope of the novel—the locus of much contemporary Place study relating to the novel. The novel's depictions of the rigid class structure of the region, the treatment of African Americans and the poor whites, and the traditional planter family economies were problematic to reviewers.³⁴ Jan Nordby Gretlund and Nakao Thornton have suggested *Delta Wedding* works to critique the injustices, claiming that, while Welty seems, as Ransom notes, only 'half apologetic' for the Fairchilds' treatment of African Americans and the poor whites of the area, she actually, through scenes with Pinchy and George, works to undermine it.³⁵

Gretlund's approach takes the obscure and often overlooked passages about Pinchy, one of the black employees of the house, and suggests that Troy, Dabney's soon-to-be husband has gotten her pregnant and that the novel subtly telling the story of Pinchy's 'coming through' is a veiled reference to her having a child—or miscarrying.³⁶ Gretlund believes that through these episodes, along with Laura and India's visit to

³⁴ See reviews by John Crowe Ransom and Diana Trilling cited elsewhere.

³⁵ Jan Nordby Gretlund, *Aesthetics*, pp. 104-123 and Thornton, pp. 29-46.

³⁶ Gretlund, *Aesthetics*, p. 116-119.

Partheny,³⁷ and an incident involving George and Denis before the novel begins, wherein George breaks up a fight between two black men and Denis walks away laughing, Welty implicitly critiques the racism of the Old South.³⁸ Furthermore, Gretlund believes that both George's marriage to the poor white woman, Robbie, and Dabney's marriage to Troy, another character from a poor background, the marriage for which the novel is titled, this class system is challenged and, ultimately, destabilised.³⁹

When Robbie, tired and hot from walking to Shellmound, wants to rest in the shade of a shack and tells Pinchy to go outside, Gretlund believes the reader can see the 'tragic' and 'sad story' as 'an indictment of the Fairchilds.'⁴⁰ However, if any of the white characters can relate to the treatment of the black characters, it is Robbie. She is, as I established earlier, an outsider from a poor background. Gretlund believes her outsider status only works to affirm 'the effectiveness of the established system.'⁴¹ However, if there were an opportunity to evoke sympathy for the plight of African Americans in the novel, it is here. Robbie, having left George, is the most disenfranchised subjectivity in the novel. She is the only character who explicitly critiques the Fairchild's for their self-centredness: 'Don't any other people in the world feel like me? I wish I knew. Don't any people somewhere love other people so much that they want to be—not like—but the same? I wanted to turn into a Fairchild' (*Delta*, pp. 254-255). The answer to Robbie's question ('Don't any other people in the world feel like me?') is obvious (*Delta*, p. 254). Pinchy must feel worse than Robbie, her voice and drama—even desire for shade—regulated by the Fairchilds, by the authorial voice of the novel, and by Robbie, who is just as unkind to Pinchy—maybe even more so—than the rest of the Fairchilds. That Robbie and Troy, both outsiders in the novel, treat Pinchy worse than any of the other Fairchilds works to suggest that it is not the Fairchilds on whom the blame for the unjust treatment of the blacks can solely be pinned. In this case, that blame must be pinned on the poor white characters. As a result, Robbie's treatment of Pinchy cannot, as Gretlund argues, be an 'indictment of the Fairchilds.'⁴² The responsibility for the primary social injustices is displaced from the economy that creates the circumstances (the Southern plantation) and placed on the bereft and unfortunate, creating a cycle of unfair treatment in the novel.

³⁷ Gretlund believes that Partheny's victimization by Ellen and the others is a sharp critique. The readers are also made to feel sympathetic at the ways the Fairchilds treat Partheny like a child. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Thornton, on the other hand, uses French Marxists Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey in order to claim that, because literature is ‘produced “through the effect of one or more ideological contradictions precisely because these contradictions cannot be solved within the ideology,”’ Welty’s supposed silence is a direct result of an impossibility of literature to resolve these contradictions.⁴³ Thornton believes that ‘by clashing idyll with exploitation, sensitivity with selfishness, generosity with impudence, love with possessiveness, wealth with poverty, Welty clearly reveals the pervasion of contradictions in the society she depicts,’ and that, by the end of the novel, it ‘embodies a Machereyan realization of the novel in its barest form and ‘owes its status as a novel to those insoluble’s and unresolvables, so to speak, which the author layers as subtexts.’⁴⁴ Toward the end of her essay, Thornton quotes Faulkner: ‘Loving all of it [Mississippi] even while he had to hate some of it because he knows now that you don’t love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults.’⁴⁵ In the summation of his essay, Gretlund writes, ‘Welty goes far beyond all crusading; she accepts the Fairchilds in all their aspects as human beings of a time and a place.’⁴⁶

However, although I agree with both scholars to an extent, I do not see the novel as an *acceptance* of the contradictions of place or believe that these passages indicate Welty loves ‘all of it even while [she] had to hate some of it.’⁴⁷ What is ‘all’ of it and how does one go about surveying the imaginative ‘all’ of a text? I believe that the criticisms are layered in the subtext, as Thornton believes, with a slight modification: both (and the many) discourses are on the surface of the text *and* are layered (as I pointed out in my previous discussion of the scene in which Robbie tells Pinchy to leave the shed). All claims are disrupted and obscured. The authorial voice is fragmented, both in the surface narrative—told from five characters’ points of view—and on the allegorical level—told by Welty through the Laura McRaven. The novel celebrates just as it critiques, or perhaps it does neither. But, the novel does not critique the culture only on the subtextual level and approve of it only on the surface level. It does both. Cracks in a solidified vision of the South become fault lines. How can one celebrate the Old South given the atrocities on

⁴³ Thornton, *Strange*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Thornton’s ideas are similar to mine here though she does not argue that the insolubles are a direct result of self-consciousness in the text, but, rather, the natural processes involved in producing any literary text. Thornton, pp. 44-45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Gretlund, *Aesthetics*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ William Faulkner, in ‘Mississippi,’ *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters by William Faulkner*, Ed. James B. Meriwether, (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 499 in Thornton, p. 40.

which it was built? To celebrate the Fairchilds is to turn a blind eye to its socioeconomic underpinnings. To give voice to the oppressed, the Fairchilds must be seen as oppressor. The novel, then, struggles between these two, never arriving at a totalizing politicized statement. If anything, the discourses of both the oppressed and the oppressors are reinforced and undermined throughout, leaving the reader to see the play for power at work in imaginative conceptualisations of the South. Obviously, then, there are two narratives at work on both the surface and in the subtext: the victimization of the poor whites and blacks on the plantation and the ‘tragic’ decline of the Fairchilds. The novel confuses how the reader should feel about these. Of course, on this side of the history, the scholar or reader knows the best narrative, but I am suggesting this corrective narrative is imposed upon, not deduced from, the novel.

Cecilia Donohue believes ‘that the most significant locus of uncertainty and ambiguity lies’ not in the socioeconomic or racial dimensions of the novel but ‘in Welty’s take on gender dominance in *Delta Wedding*.’⁴⁸ She believes the men, specifically Battle and George, have the final say in the work.⁴⁹ Because Welty uses five females to tell her story, and makes their emotional texture (arguably) the primary concern of the novel, many scholars have claimed that the female voice is the predominate one.⁵⁰ However, Donohue points to a few scenes to prove that, though the women saturate the text, it is truly the men who call the shots.⁵¹ Most notable among her examples is the dancing scene, which ends abruptly when George hollers and ‘is able to silence a houseful of exuberant women and female children waltzing in anticipation of the wedding.’⁵² Just as the economic realities of the plantation are undone by competing discourses, the female voices vie for dominance among the male voices. Who is really in control is indeterminate. The idea that this is a place where women have a voice and the patriarchy is undermined is as viable as the idea that men have definitively subjugated the women to their authority.

Cecilia Donohue believes that ‘the most fundamental contradiction concerns the title of the novel and how much, or in this case, how little, page time and overall attention

⁴⁸ Donohue, p. 84.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 86

⁵⁰ Donohue cites Linda Tate, Rebecca Mark, Danielle Fuller, and Laura Sloan Patterson as scholars who read the novel as a pronouncement of female empowerment through landscape, autonomous voices, journeys toward selfhood, and a reflection of ‘new voices’ regarding ‘changing sexual domestic roles for women,’ pp. 84-85.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 85-88.

⁵² Ibid., p. 87.

is granted the subject is specifically signifies.⁵³ Donohue believes that the novel struggles with “what story [it] wants to tell.”⁵⁴ Dabney’s wedding competes with the conflict between Robbie and George, stories about the Fairchilds’ past, ‘a search for a missing brooch,’ and the ruminations of the unmarried older sister, Shelly, among other plot elements.⁵⁵ Donohue thinks when Robbie, in the midst of all the family drama, and two thirds of the way into the novel, remembers that Dabney is getting married, the reminder might as well be for the reader.⁵⁶ I must agree with this sentiment but for a different reason. The tangential elements of the novel are actually the primary focus. The real wedding of *Delta Wedding* is not between Troy and Dabney but between Welty and Place, which she attempts to officiate through technique. The movement toward Welty’s wedding is rife with as much joy, despair, obfuscation, unexpressed longing, and stories as the wedding between Troy and Dabney. It is, however, a marriage that never happens. There are too many grooms at the altar. This indeterminacy does not mar the text or suggest that it is uneven—or carelessly crafted—as a work of art. I agree with Donohue that these issues make ‘the book highly discussable and teachable.’⁵⁷ I would go a step further, however, and also claim that these small ‘Souths,’ these multiple grooms are a natural part of any place. The reason such a discussion is salient in this case is because so much work has been done (even by Welty herself) to pigeonhole not only the novel but Welty when discussing the Place. At the end of the novel, at the picnic, Laura ‘turn[s] again to them, both arms held out to the radiant night’ (*Delta*, p. 336). It is an echo of the earlier scene in which Laura reflects on the children’s game. Her hands reach out to make the circle. Sometimes she wants to be in the circle, to be a part of the action. Sometimes she does not. By the end of the novel, even though the Fairchilds have invited Laura to stay, the last image we see is Laura with both arms in the air, embracing night, a foreshadowing, perhaps, of the ‘freed hands’ we see at the end of *The Optimist’s Daughter*, a freedom that comes from accepting that representing Place can sometimes end with the artist on the outside, eluded by that which informs her practice and vision.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 89

Chapter 3: Rewriting the Rewritten: Postmodernism, MicroSouths, and the Southern Novelist

In this final chapter of the critical piece, I aim to explore several issues relating to Welty and my own project. I want to discuss connections between Welty's craft and my own. Then, I want to explain my justifications for using Welty as the subject of my study and explore how I had to reconcile my resistance to postmodern critical theory with what I saw as postmodern sensibilities in Welty's work. Finally, building upon the discussion of postmodernism and Welty's work, I want to move beyond Welty and, using both my own experience of the South and my creative vision of it, explore the relationship between the past South and the Southern writer in order to show the past's relevance--and continued existence--in contemporary Southern life and literature. This exploration will conclude with a brief discussion of how parts of my novel might be read in light of the critical issues I have raised.

While the thematic dimensions of my work and Welty's differ significantly, on the technical side, we do share some aesthetic sensibilities. I deliberately chose the same kind of sparse prose style characteristic of *The Optimist's Daughter* in my novel, *The Gospel According According to No One*. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty does not belabour descriptions of places or people. It is enough for her to write 'the church' or 'the courthouse' without extended exposition in order to evoke place, much as I write 'Ford Dealership,' 'Dollar Store,' and 'megachurch.' Welty's stylistic choices might be the result of thematics. This is, after all, the story of Laurel's father's death, and the narrative is tightly focused on Laurel throughout. We are made to imaginatively walk through the miasma of Laurel's grief as a result of this technique. It is not until the end of the novel, when Laurel comes face to face with her memories, that Welty privileges exposition over scene-driven narrative. In much the same way, the slim prose technique in my novel reflects the difficulty the characters have with understanding where they are in space and time. It has a bewildering effect, lending a dreamlike quality to my narrative.

As a result of the sparse, economical prose, the movement of my novel is fast. If the reader does not pay close attention to the action or the placement of the characters, he or she could easily get lost. The first few chapters of the novel, and, later, discussions between Sherman and Timothy and the siege chapter are all examples of moments in the novel that move quickly, with only a short sentence here and there to indicate action or

describe characters. Welty's *Delta Wedding* is full of similar moments. For instance, in chapter four, Welty writes,

The dinner bell rang. Battle and the boys came in rosy and slicked, playing with the barking dogs. Orrin had on his pompadour cap. George came down with Ranny riding him, knees on his shoulders. Ranny had the family telescope to his eye, and turned it in both hands about the room, exclaiming. (*Delta*, p. 202).

In just five sentences, Welty includes placement, action, and descriptions for four characters. It is a dizzying effect but one that reflects well the chaotic energy of the Fairchild household. I chose to tell the story of my novel in this way, too, because it reflects the energy of the characters' movements in Palaver. In the 'moment' of the novel, they face dilemmas that demand their immediate consideration. They must act or be lost.

The present tense of the novel further lends to this urgency throughout. The novel is alive at every moment. While a past tense novel can admittedly move briskly and urgently, I felt I needed the added force of the present tense. While I can't deny the presence of an authorial voice, as a result of the present tense and the sparse prose, it is at times a quiet voice, creating the allusion that this story is not related, but, rather, lived by the reader. I wanted the novel to move with the same power as the train that chugs through Palaver.

Another feature that arises out of this effect is a kind of half-telling, a technique that does not provide clear explanations of what a character might mean in dialogue or what a particular action might suggest. In Sherman's opening scene, I write that the two boys snorting cocaine are "between his toes." Later in the novel, Tracey is also "between his toes." Although not explicit, the description of the characters' relations to Sherman indicates his point of view. He's just pulled back the lever of his recliner and is lying all the way back, so far that his line of sight is level with his feet, and he sees Damon and Shirley between his toes. It demands the reader to make the connection between the literal idea of being placed spatially between his toes, and the fact that he can simply see the characters between his toes.

In the Timothy sections, these half-tellings abound, but in an altogether different sense. The point of view is focused more on Timothy's consciousness. In the first chapter, I write, 'And to hear the whisper, the steady rhythm of knowing, certainty. Flying is a lot, of course. He knows that. But, there must be more.' What Timothy wants to be certain of is not indicated—neither is what flying is 'a lot' of or what there must be 'more' of. It is in this ambiguity that I introduce Timothy's struggle to understand his world. It is a

poetic technique, I suppose, but it works well within my novel because so much of the action is complicated by ways of seeing—or not seeing.

Welty employs the same technique in *Delta Wedding*. The best example of it is within the sections about Pinchy. Welty writes,

When Pinchy was coming through, she had not looked at her at all, but simply turned up her face, dark-purple like a pansy, that no more saw her nor knew her than a pansy. Now, speaking primly, back in her relationship on the place, she was without any mystery to move her. (*Delta*, p. 317)

What, exactly, the ‘coming through’ means is elusive. So, too, the phrases ‘relationship on the place’ and ‘mystery to move her’ are ambiguous. We might assume they all pertain to religious experience or, as I summarised in the previous chapter, Gretlund’s suggestion that Pinchy is pregnant and, later, giving birth. The text itself, however, never fully explains the ambiguity.

Despite having similar stylistic approaches, choosing Welty as a study forced me to come to terms with an iteration (or iterations) of the South with which I was unfamiliar. Unlike Flannery O’Connor’s novels, with which my own novel shares more thematic sensibilities, Welty’s novels are almost completely devoid of religious sentiment, both in their overarching narrative visions and the visions of the characters. Rather than focus on variations on a similar theme, I was forced to work with a discourse (or discourses) about the South that was foreign to me—that of the Southern aristocracy and the mannerisms and symbolic dimensions of an older Place. Since McCullers and O’Connor are both Georgia writers, I also had to go outside of the Southern Place I know in order to explore what being ‘Southern’ means in a cultural context different from my own. Jackson, Mississippi, lifelong home to Welty, is roughly five hundred miles from where I live in Georgia. Add to that the years since her last novel, *The Optimist’s Daughter* (forty-three), and the differences are pronounced. What I’ve found, however, is that many of the questions I’ve asked and ideas I’ve explored are common to both (or the many) iterations of Southernness. Imagining the Southern place was just as complicated in Welty’s generation as it is in mine. The idea of a New South had taken hold of the Southerner’s imagination long before the seventies.

Employing a postmodern lens proved particularly difficult in my study. Rather than deconstructing works in order to discuss how they fragment themselves and reveal myriad (often contradictory) languages about their subjects, I’ve preferred to take a novel on its own terms, to explore narrative as a means to meaning making in the world rather than seeing it as a mode rife with inconsistencies and indeterminate meaning. I do not

find the nihilism of deconstruction or the poststructuralists in general useful or consistent with the purpose of literature, not all literature anyway. I don't believe an author's vision, or the language through which the author communicates that vision, is suspect from the beginning. I suppose that's not to say that it's *not* the case that language works to undo itself (when studied through a materialist or naturalist framework), only that, even if it does, as a general rule, I see little use in exploring a text on these terms. In fact, I see the dismantling of a text undermining the artform. I agree with Marilynne Robinson:

Quite simply, to approach any utterance as if its meaning is separable from its presentation is to disallow art in every positive sense of the word. It is to strip away the individuation that might make a work a new witness, and it is to violate the bond of reader and writer. The essence of our art lies in creating a lingering dream, good or bad, that other souls can enter. Dreaming one's soul into another's is an urgent business of the human mind: the dreaming itself, not whatever agenda can supposedly be extracted from it.¹

However, because Place is central to my creative vision, and there is really no way to conceptualise the South without considering the economic and social realities at work in it, the study necessitates a discussion of postmodernism; in fact, the South begs for it. Antebellum houses that serve as museums, Civil War reenactments, and Native American reservations doubling as tourist destinations are proof that Place in the U.S. South is actually (dis) Placed, removed from reality and recycled over and again. I am not enough of a sentimentalist to believe there's something authentic about Epcot's World Showcase. I live in a place warring with itself, economically and politically, about what it is. It might even be that it no longer is—nor can be—anything other than duplicitous—a mirror of the rest of Western culture in the twenty-first century. Part of this is a result of industrialization and globalization. Also at work, however, is a critical dismantling of what the South as Place means through rewritings of narratives about the past and reinvestigations of the South's role in U.S. and the broader world. So, in discussing Place, I had to come to terms with what, exactly, constituted Place in the South. I am no closer to any definitive response to this than I was at the beginning.

If so much of Welty's work has been seen through the lens of Place—which is often the case for the Southern writer in general—I, too, had to address the unique ways that her novels are portals into larger concerns about constructing place. What I found is that the process of representation was a struggle for her just as it is for me. This, in turn,

¹ Marilynne Robinson, 'On "Beauty,"' *Pushcart Prize XXXVII: Best of the Small Presses*, ed. by Bill Henderson (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), pp. 80-93 (p. 85).

led to the realization that perhaps the primary vision of her novels *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter* concerns the struggle to represent the South imaginatively. I discovered my job as a scholar was not to deconstruct her work; she had already 'violated the bond of the reader and writer' as a result of her self-conscious approach.² My job as a critical reader of her work, then, was not so much to prove that she did not *mean* what she wrote—or could not mean what she wrote—but, rather, to show how she dramatized the struggle to mean at all. Without the connection between Laura McRaven and Laurel McElva Hand as allegories of Welty's writing, this would not have been possible.

Although the connection between Welty's work and mine seems tenuous at best, I believe the connection rests, in the broadest sense, in our explorations of discourses that have no clear referents in the 'current' realities of the South, whether by current we mean 1946 or 2015. This, I think, is what makes the postmodern angle on Welty (and the South) an apt and interesting, if bizarre, study. The strangeness of calling Welty a postmodernist begs bigger questions about how one 'rightly' categorizes the South and Southern literature.

A cook at the Waffle House recently told me how much he once loved Southern literature but had given it up for postmodern literature. He could not understand why, as a long-time lover of Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Wolfe, and Wendell Berry, he would be drawn to the works of David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo, and Dave Eggers. He found the two at odds with each other. I find this distinction between Southern and the postmodern interesting, though not original. Southern literature, as a body of work, is typically generalized and stereotyped. Although many examples work against this norm, the mention of Southern literature still conjures a host of familiar characters and motifs: the backwoods (and backwards) redneck, the mint julep drinking aristocrat, the Appalachian hillbilly, the farmer, the itinerate preacher, rocking-chair gossip, crude but clever witticisms, homespun superstitions, etcetera. People have also mistakenly believed the South of fiction to be insular and untouched by the global economy. It is sometimes the South of the plantation or the South of the trailer park (in terms of class, as a whole, these polarities probably do inform most of Southern literature, contemporary or otherwise. One rarely sees a middle-class Southern Gothic tale, for instance). In popular imagination Southerners are typically thought to be more Dostoevsky's man of action than the overly conscious.³ As a general rule we do not see many Hamlets ploughing fields or constructing meth labs. Southerners are also stereotyped as stubborn,

² Ibid., p. 85.

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, (New York: Vintage, 1993).

uneducated, and, sometimes, if they're not romanticized as wise because of years of whiskey drinking and nights camped out by the Chattahoochee, dumb altogether. In fact, some Southerners think recliners are recent innovations.⁴ They know what they believe, as the 'Jesus Saves' signs along the interstates attest. The Southern novel is not typically thought to be self-reflexive, metafictional, or interested in dismantling metanarratives. It is not skeptical—if aware at all—of the academy's prevailing notions about itself. It does not worry with epistemological uncertainty or wring its hands over concerns about Truth, discourses of power, or superstructures. Rather, Southerners in fiction brandish guns, engage in bar brawling, wreck their pickups, beat their wives (or their husbands), burn down the barn (or house), spout racial slurs, have religious epiphanies, or all of the above, in a single novel. But, this is not just the South of pre-1950's Southern fiction; contemporary Southern literature abounds with the same themes and characters. Harry Crews's *Feast of Snakes*, Clyde Edgerton's *Raney*, Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*, and Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow* all code the South using many of these older thematics and motifs. Wendell Berry's work, for instance, is an example of the old Southern discourses of the Proprietary Ideal still at work. His convictions about subsistence farming and the economy directly oppose the economic realities of Late Capitalism. Television shows such as *True Detective* and *True Blood* and films such as *Mud* and *The World Made Straight*, with their poor, backwoods characters and eccentric folk religions are also proof that this stereotypical and generalized South is alive and well. In short, the South *seems* incongruous with postmodernism.

But even if these generalizations were representative of all Southern fiction, why scholars, or readers in general, think they preclude postmodern readings is largely a result of a false dichotomy between what people consider the Real South (New South—or perhaps one might even say a Post New South at this point) and the Old South (though the notion of the 'Old South' doesn't work well to conceptualise Place, either). Martyn Bone believes the economic realities of the South make iterations of the past South in fiction 'anachronistic.'⁵ They have 'allowed certain neo-Agrarian critics to celebrate [...] 'sense of place' rather than recognizing that [...] 'the South' no longer exist[s].'⁶ Bone believes by the 1930s, the dream of self-sustaining agricultural communities 'based on personal private property and held together by the cooperation of planter and yeoman'

⁴ In the film, *Sweet Home Alabama* (a film set in the contemporary South), Earl Smoother shows off his new recliner to his daughter by switching the lever and propping up his feet. *Sweet Home Alabama*, dir. by Andy Tennant (Touchstone Pictures, 2002) [on DVD].

⁵ Bone, p. 39.

⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

had been undermined by finance capitalism and industrialization.⁷ Throughout the 1930s and beyond, however, Bone thinks representations of the South in fiction were remarkably silent on the changing landscape and socioeconomic realities.⁸ Writers continued, instead, depicting long stretches of uninterrupted farmland, a sustained sense of communal identity, and, most strikingly, a significant relationship between the individual and the land.⁹ Bone believes Welty's 'magnolia flower which 'can be seen for several miles on a clear day' is an example of the southern writer pitting, and ultimately privileging, a 'southern' Nature [against] commerce.'¹⁰ To the southern writer, the industrialized, heterogeneous South was no match for southern Nature.

Using my experience of the South and Scott Romine's theoretical work in *The Real South*, I want to challenge the notion that these older forms are no longer the South (and, further, that they do not lend themselves to postmodern readings) and suggest that it is in these forms and their juxtapositions against the New South—whatever that might be—that we see the South for what it is, an amalgam of both the old and new and, perhaps, even discourses that cannot be located or categorized at all.

In some ways, the South in which I grew up comes straight out of dusty Southern fiction. I lived in rural areas in north Alabama and north Georgia. I was a member of, and, at twelve years old, a minister in, the Southern Baptist Church. My father was also a pastor in the denomination. Hard-working, blue-collar families, many of whom were farming families, populated the churches in which my father worked. I sat with elderly women on porch swings, drank sweet tea, listened to Gospel quartets, heard cicadas chirp at night, went frog gigging, played in vast fields and forests, rode in pick-up trucks down dirt roads, played in a tire swing, ran barefoot in Georgia clay, embraced a hellfire and brimstone version of Christianity, and ate fried cornbread, grits, and biscuits and gravy.

The South's past has a powerful impact on its present. My Southern life was inherited. I'd argue that my parents inherited theirs as well. Perhaps it has always been more of a myth than a reality. I saw the effects of the homogenizing forces of capitalism at work in my own back yard (quite literally: the forest behind my house was leveled to build a subdivision), but I still considered myself 'country'—was even proud of it. I even considered myself country when I moved to the UK when I was about as country as Taylor Swift is now. Many of the Southern people I know see the old stories, much as

⁷ Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980), p. 52 in Bone, p. 6.

⁸ Bone, p. 38.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

George in *Delta Wedding*, as ‘holy’ (*Delta*, p. 281) because they enable people to ‘stick [themselves] into present environments.’¹¹

I recently visited a friend in Chatsworth. He’s a staunch independent Baptist, and his church’s defining doctrine is the infallibility, nay, transcendence, of the King James Bible. Religion came up in conversation, of course. He wanted to know how (and why) my theological perspectives had changed through the years. When I explained my intellectual journey, he said that even if all I was saying were true, he would still believe the way he does. His self-awareness and honesty are rare in Chatsworth. His stories, even if primitive or naïve by postmodern accounts, help ground him. His identity, his relationship with his family, and his sense of right and wrong in the world are inextricably tied to the fundamentalist ideology espoused by his church (and, as an aside, I’ve sometimes been envious of his simple, existential angst-free life). He had essentially admitted to the practice of what Romine calls ‘improvisation,’ ‘suspending disbelief as a matter of everyday practice.’¹²

The race narratives, unfortunately, work in much the same way. Students in Mississippi recently put a noose on a statue of a Civil Rights activist at the University of Mississippi. A student at the University of Oklahoma was caught reciting a racist chant to a busload of students. Once upon a time I had in-laws who used racial slurs and placed Confederate flags in the cabs of their pickup trucks and on the front porch of their trailers. When I pressed my ex brother-in-law about his flag, he said, ‘It’s tradition. It’s who I am.’ Novelty shops sell key chains, posters, and tee shirts with quips like ‘The South will rise again.’ Apparently, some Southerners are sore losers. Strangely enough, I also knew an African American who sported a Confederate flag on the front of his pickup truck. At any rate, the South as the site of loss and humiliation still offers narratives of Place, giving people roles to play, as backwards and insidious as those roles are in this case.

At my high school, we had two mascots, one official and one unofficial: an Indian and a plowboy. I’d never met a single Native American in Chatsworth; truth is, there weren’t any. I saw them only in Cherokee, North Carolina where they dance for tourists. But, we played Indian fight songs and did the Tomahawk.¹³ At the beginning of our football games, a (white) student dressed as a Native American would mount a horse, gallop to the fifty-yard line and throw a flaming spear onto the field. I got chills. And I

¹¹ Romine, p. 13.

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ A gesture in support of one’s Indian-themed sports team in which one swings his or her arm at the elbow and chants a pseudo Native American tune

didn't even like football. In retrospect, of course, if I'm being generous, I read it as a normalized ritual that spoke to our desire for absolution. The shadow of the removal of the Natives, what has amounted to, on a grand scale, genocide, hovered over the community. Just a mile from my house was the Chief Vann House, home to a wealthy Cherokee plantation owner who was removed when the Cherokees were driven out of Georgia. Just south of my county was the capital of the Cherokee Nation, New Echota. So, perhaps the high school team used parody in order to honor The Indians (all of them), who were brave, honorable warriors. If I'm feeling cynical, it was farcical, in bad taste, and downright disrespectful, and it signified nothing. However one reads the sign of a bunch of white teenagers pretending to be Native Americans, one thing is certain: we were performing the past.

Features of the landscape are also appropriated into the homogenizing forces of Late Capitalism. Subdivisions called Stony Creek, Mirror Lake, Brook Place, and Oak Mountain advertise a connection to nature all the while developers uproot trees and destroy ecosystems to build them. For a few years I lived on Spring Street and later in Spring Place but, as far as I could tell, neither place had springs. I also lived one road down from Horseshoe Bend Road, which, I discovered only recently, was named for a tributary that ran behind it. Few places remain untouched by the mechanisms of capitalism. Those that do probably won't for long.

For many, Atlanta, the international hub of the South, is the antithesis of what the South 'truly is.' Although I have lived most of my life within a hundred miles of downtown Atlanta, it has seemed as foreign to me as London. Its ethnic and religious populations are diverse. There are myriad museums of art and design, a thriving theatre and music scene, and it is home to well-regarded institutions of higher learning: Georgia Tech, Emory University, Georgia State, and Columbia Seminary. The Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is the busiest in the world. Major broadcast networks (CNN), major international brands (Coca-Cola), and major banks (SunTrust) are all headquartered in Atlanta. Like any metropolis, it is crowded, the crime rate is high, and the transportation infrastructure cannot handle the traffic. In Atlanta there's not enough green space, not enough farmland, and not enough of the family-oriented, slow pace of life typically associated with the country South. There's not enough talk of what Sherman did to Atlanta, either. However, Atlanta, too, is the South. These two Souths (and the many more) are the real South. The New South defines itself, and its Newness, against the older South (They are behind the times!), and the older South resists the New South (They don't care about the individual but are driven by greed! Or, they're trying to make us

forget our precious history). The competing discourses of these two iterations, or any of the others against, well, any of the others, work to create the South in all its contradictions. Romine believes that ‘time and again in the stories in and about the late South, an opposition between the real and the fake emerges to perform crucial narrative work’ and that in this narrative work ‘[c]entral themes shrink in the presence of alternative thematics; unification gives way to the pressures of micronarratives and the microSouths they sustain.’¹⁴

If it wasn’t already, it should be abundantly clear now that trying to locate the South and then to explain (or prescribe) the Southern writer’s relationship to it is as dubious a process as carrying Annie Bundren to her resting place. It logically follows, then, that many representations of the South are tenable or, to use a more controversial word, realistic—both those representations devoid of the traditional southern flavor and those that embrace it fully. After all, as Romine writes, the ‘real South is [...] the fake South.’¹⁵ However, not everyone has seen it this way. In fact, for some, the Real South is the Atlanta South, the South formed by popular culture and urbanization. I must admit that when, at the end (fortunately) of the first draft, as I began to dive into my research on the South and discover these ideas of a ‘new South,’ I was troubled. I read in Fred Hobson’s *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* that while there ‘was an acute self-consciousness, an intense awareness of being southern, as well as a preoccupation with old themes, old settings and truisms’ in southern writers even up until the 1970’s, he felt that the later ‘no South’ of Bobbie Ann Mason and Dorothy Allison (both novelists informed more by popular culture and broader conceptualisations of Place) best represented the Southern novelist’s postmodern South.¹⁶ He cautions against using ‘southern stereotypes’ or ‘regional types rather than individuals.’¹⁷ He writes, ‘The writer in any period who is limited by space or time—who writes a fiction that, however enlightening for the moment or the region, does not transcend the moment or region—is ultimately the writer who is forgotten.’¹⁸ A quotation from Richard Ford in *Ploughshares* only made matters worse:

A Piece of My Heart was set in Arkansas and Mississippi, and I, of course, thought that though the setting was Southern, the book somehow

¹⁴ Romine, p. 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶ Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures, 33 (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991), pp. 6, 81.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁸ Ibid.

wasn't Southern. But then the people who wrote about it all said it was another Southern novel, and I just said, Okay, that's it. No more Southern writing for me.¹⁹

It's not easy dealing with the implications of setting one's work in the South. I realized I ran the risk of being labelled an outdated Southern idealist or that people would see my work as parody, signifying nothing.

But even if I'm borrowing from the older forms, themes, or 'banks' of characters, it's because I have participated in those elements of the South. And, even if they are only performative (and I do not believe they are *only* performative), they're what I know. They, too, are the South. Having grown up in the South, and lived nowhere else except for the two years I spent in England, it is as much a part of me as breathing. This, in fact, is one of the reasons I wanted to move abroad. I did not expect--nor want--to write about the South. Surprisingly, before I started the degree, I had read only a few canonical Southern works, such as *The Heart is Lonely Hunter*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and only a smattering of contemporary Southern writers. Originally I had planned an experimental half suicide letter, half sci-fi novel for the creative project. After a conversation with James Annesley, however, in which I discussed my childhood and he said 'That's a novel,' I decided to give it a try. This, coupled by the fact that I missed home, set me on the path.

Fortunately, living abroad gave me the critical space I needed to write the South and also reflect upon its identity and my relationship to that identity. My novel started as a kind of love letter to Georgia but ended up something else (I'm not sure, exactly, what it is). The story came from experience—imaginative and otherwise. But, the critical exposure to Southern literature made the process tricky. Fortunately, as I said above, I'd already written the first draft when I discovered the genre had been exhausted. As such, I did not want to dismantle the work on the basis of what the critics said. But, I know the way in which many will receive it. The homemade drugs, the rattlesnakes, the overall-wearing miscreants, and kudzu-rich roadsides all suggest the novel is snug within the Southern Gothic tradition.

Regardless, writing about, or turning toward (or borrowing from), the past South is also writing about the present South. I believe I have, however, written beyond what

¹⁹ Don Lee, 'About Richard Ford,' *Ploughshares* 70 (Fall 1996).
<https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-1996/about-richard-ford-profile>, [accessed 1 April 2015].

Hobson calls 'regional' types.²⁰ In analyzing the novel from this side of the critical work, I believe that when it seems I have used a type, I also fully acknowledge that it is a type. Mary Jo and Raymond are obviously tied to the land and ideas of community, even though, as Jack Tribes criticizes them, they do not directly contribute to the community but to the cash nexus. They represent the mythos of the Proprietary Ideal, even though that has long since proved impossible—on the scale the Agrarians imagined it anyway. In 2008, the setting of the novel, this mythos is, I believe, on its last legs. Jack Tribes, then, if Raymond cannot rage against the mechanisms of industrialization, does it for him. Tribes's parents' remove from the farm and his father's death as a result of the explosion at the wire factory embitters him. To Tribes, Palaver abandoned the Agrarian community, what had for so long grounded the South, because of greed. In this sense, Tribes is a psychopathic Agrarian. That Jack Tribes is 'No One' (although that operates on quite a different level in the surface narrative), suggests that even he, who is in some ways a different kind of Raymond, represents a story about the South that is defunct. The abandoned railroad station, the strip malls and fast food restaurants, and the presence of the university in Palaver all point to multiple stories rather than a recycled or clichéd story of the South. Other interesting paradoxes of Southern identity are also explored in Timothy, who becomes, after the war in Iraq, a stranger in his own country. He is the visitor from the East, a miracle worker and also a connection to the wider world. His difference, embodied in the novel through levitation, is frightening to the people of his community. He is literally marked by cultural and ideological Otherness by the tattoos on his arms.

Sherman is the one character who has the ability to see the South as 'discourse.' It might even be his self-consciousness and his awareness of the multiple realities of the South that undo him. Sherman embodies, much like Tribes, the extent to which postmodernism—or the postsouthern—fragments the self. The response both Tribes and Sherman offer to the conundrum is nihilism, a giving up on any notion of the South—or their relationship to it. Of course, nothingness is a story in and of itself.

Because the setting of the novel was inspired by Carrollton, Georgia, I believe I was able to avoid a Romantic, or purely parodic, view of the South. Moving to Carrollton at seventeen introduced me to the wider South, though, in retrospect, that is quite hard to believe. Downtown there are locally owned restaurants that serve bohemian fare. There's an independent bookshop, an art studio, and luxury lofts on the second floors of all of the

²⁰ Hobson, p. 81.

buildings. The intellectual and cosmopolitan climate of the city is a by-product of the university. However, it is also very much a traditional Southern town where Good Old Boy politics keep a tight rein on the city, where dozens of farms surround the city limits, and where rural, or 'country,' churches still offer people a sense of community. Just a few years ago, the mayor banned a performance of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The racist church in which my father served was just north of the city limits. Carrollton has also been reluctant to accept the homogenization of the South. It has been only in the last fifteen to twenty years that they have let major food chains build in the city limits. This battle between old and new made Carrollton a fitting inspiration for the novel.

While the South no longer exists (perhaps it never did), the stories that tell southerners that it does remain. Whatever economic or cultural realities dismantle a monolithic understanding of the South, however, having a sense of place is an embodied practice. The feeling Place evokes, the unique ways people imbue it with meaning, and how the manner of people's existences within it affect their *sense* of Place are in the realm of subjectivity. Who better, then, to explore it, to share the 'dream' of Place, to use Robinson's language, than the artist?²¹ Living inside the artist's dream, if nothing else, enables the subject to experience varied Southern languages, some horrifying, some dreamlike, but all part of an enduring and mysterious tradition

²¹ Robinson, p. 85.

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