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A DARKER ROOM
(a collection of stories and poems)

By

Charles E. Entrekin, Jr.

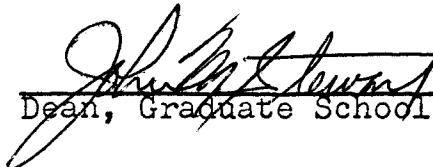
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1974

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Of the material here presented, the following have been published, accepted for publication, or received an award:

1. Two poems, "MONTANA" and "MASTERS", in issue number seven of the Berkeley Poets Cooperative, Berkeley, California, 1974.
2. A poem, "EARTHSONG", in The Green Horse For Poetry, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1974.
3. A poem, "IN HOBOKEN", shared second prize of \$50.00 in a Festival of the Arts contest, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1974.

HERE IN THE DARK, LOVE

I'm out here in the dark, love,
because I wanted to be alone.
Because I wanted something to give-in to.
I tried to remember how lives change, always
altered and yet remain the same, but tonight

 I felt something break
as after a long fall. Now even our names
seem best left alone, unchanged
like names buried character by character
in stone.

 I remember the tunes, love,
that's why I've come. I remember
the honeysuckle touch of your tongue.

 You can see I'm here without my clothes,
and the moon's not bright; but listen to me first,
something's gone wrong in my life, some
things I've not told you about. Listen.
Some blood always runs cold as mine.
This nakedness on the lawn
contains all I've ever been.

 I know you're going to say
I keep bringing you what has changed
without me.

 I know when I wake
in the morning my seed will remain
one more secret egg on your plate,
but you see I don't care, I also
will not know what's become of us.

BIRMINGHAM

Of all the places you could die
trapped if you didn't leave fast
or have lots of money, this is the one
you remember best. This is your birthplace.

You wanted out the day she ran away,
left you the child and the furniture.
But you stayed, innocent and twenty-one,
made love to practiced women. One,
forty-one, who kept your child for free;
one, thirty-three, who hoped her husband
died, a little at a time; and one,
twenty-nine, who came to you animalized,
hardened with lies.

It was a steel time town, younger
and harder than Birmingham Sunday could break.
Three black children died. You made love
to the wife of a salesman. He failed
to give her children. And failed again
she cried when you stopped cold,
told her, no, no more children.

That night outside Memphis, the Mississippi
mosquitoes like furies bidding you goodbye,
you turn in your mind the meaning of escape.
Almost, you wanted to lie, you're innocent
if you don't go back. The child asleep, your red car
packed, you douse the fire and drive out fast.

AND SHE SAID

When she was young as the child she dreamed
she spun through fields of men as wind through wheat,
and her hands reached up like gifts of white gloves,
she said, "Love is whole only when love can be hurt."

It seemed as likely a thing caged she married me,
each night in bed a death and the secret women
of her body betrayed. Entered like an unholy house,
she said, "My body is an asylum against my life."

And she became the whore of other-women dreams,
her fingers fluttering at her face like smelly plumes
plucked from a dead bird's wing. She moved in a madhouse
skein, she said, "The dead are living and the living dead."

When the dust swelled to shapes she could not face
she left off living and took up dying, she said,
"My dreams were larger than I willed."

IN SAN FRANCISCO

Coming towards me
like light from a distant star
not yet arrived anywhere
he entered the park
fondling an animal-headed
smooth-carved redwood cane;
 then pushing his black
leather jacket loose at the neck
his dark-skinned hand
found and placed the harp,
the black eyes closing,
the confined chords
a hymn, a dirge,
 and suddenly I know how
the sounds of what I have broken
are healing in the ground.

EARTHSONG

And what could she say
who knew it best, took nothing
kept nothing and gave no warning
she would stop and turn away.

No one knows how it happens
these roads stretch out through
snow, flare, and turn to covered
hills, trees quiet as cows
gathered for night.

No insects hum. An old barn
cracks from the cold. Every night
her old body hides in the dark
under the rustle of corn leaves.

I want to reach out
pull the land away
reach down and hold her
shining like moon on the snow.

YOUR EMPTY HOUSE

When I arrive you've gone
and no one seems to remember
your face. I knock at the door,
but they won't come out, say,
you're wrong, nobody's ever
lived here before.

Perhaps they're right,
we need more than memory,
we need a door that won't get replaced
by years, and we are wrong not to make one
to work that way.

ALABAMA KUDZU

This is the fear, the words
trapped in the back of your throat,
that nothing is enough.

In your blood you face
the inner latticework of kudzu,
you understand the brown trees
all motion pulled to the gound,
like horses mute in quicksand,
the tall and crumbling pine
beneath the undying green.

But this is only the fear,
you have told yourself, regret nothing.
Your eyes are still blue, and inside
you are still capable of surrendering.

MONTANA

The dream of an ashen faced woman wakes me
and it's snowing
and I'm cold.

Her face is hidden
somewhere in shadows,
a phone booth
with one light on
that blinks once
and goes out.

In the dark
the refrigerator cuts on.
I listen to its whine,
the snow falling.

MASTERS

I pick you out, a man to become,
yes and no together; you lead me
into the desert. Your single words
are too thick for meaning. I
can't make them out. The cactus
plants are all I understand. And
the heat.

In the moment I take my eyes
away you fall and die. Whose
death do I feel? This is all
a dream. I wake and think of
writing it down. A man walks
through my window from Montana.
"Thirty white geese are saved
from extinction," he says, and helps
himself to my liquor. We ignore
the snow.

"I was just in Mexico," I said,
"and felt a man die." He rages out
in the midst of a blizzard with my
liquor. This is another dream.
They flower like carnations in a bowl.
I am awake now. The white petals
fall away and sink.

MISSOULA SPRING

I sit at my desk, feel my life
become like smoke. The cream
flakes in my greasy coffee.

I have become one of my own
poems. A carnation stinks
inside a transparent bowl.
The streets open black
under melting snow.

ON YOUR BIRTHDAY

I mark it down on my
calendar memory this
Thanksgiving on your
birthday and no presents
except Pat's hand-made
tray of recipes;

and as it grows dark
outside with snow on the
ground all around us the
turkey cooking and the
football game

I feel suddenly like a
stranger divided between
day and night, who's come
dressed against the cold in
an old shirt, old and full
of holes like a memory,

and as if I've left my
body drifting in the dark
my hands in you struggle,
relax, and begin slowly to
move again these days like
petals blown before a wind.

for Maggie, in Montana, 1973

IN HOBOKEN

The loud words have no voice
for him to hear them;
the hard-edged canvas shore
receives them with sand;
his mind, a moon, a point of interest,
pulls the night towards day,
one more day
where angels with furry mouths
hover in the fog
swirl in the sun
break on the backs of tenements.

for Luke Wallin

APPLES

Up only two more flights. The rank smell of the stairwell made him wince. The off-green walls peeled like a sun-burnt corpse under a weak, almost brown light bulb. At the roof door he stopped and looked down. He had always been fascinated by long flights of stairs, like the one he had seen in Montgomery, Alabama, the one that had no supports and wound mysteriously toward the bedroom where Jefferson Davis had slept. He had been ten then. The image of that incredible staircase polished to a deep museum brown flickered briefly, and then faded from his mind. From the back of his throat he coughed. He had not been able to rid himself of the cold he had caught the very day he and Jeela had arrived in New York. They had wandered about in a rain for hours, unable to take it in, the streets of New York, unlike anything they had expected. He thought of her again, their first night in that cheap hotel, counting out on the bed their \$600.00 in twenties, the way she leaned against him, somehow already giving up in the way she offered herself without looking at him. He pushed her out of his

thoughts, leaned over the banister and spit. The snot and saliva fell wavering in an updraft that seemed to hold it buoyant for two or three flights; then it plummeted and hit with a good satisfying smack.

Clayton Morgan was not a large man. He had always hoped for five foot ten but had settled finally for five seven. He stood now at the top of the stairway and felt himself grow even smaller. Like a small diminished man standing at the end of a long tunnel, he looked down through the stairwell and waited for someone to come out, to recognize him perhaps. But nothing moved. His hands drifted over the smooth wood of the banister rail; its smoothness seemed out of place with the dull lighting, the green concrete walls that oozed a dampness out of long irregular cracks. He shook himself loose from the railing and turned toward the black iron door behind him.

Clay had swallowed a number of pain killers, Percodan, he didn't remember how many, and he was feeling rather quiet and sleepy as he pushed open the door. But once outside he felt wide awake. The cold night air rushed over him. He could feel the presence of the people and traffic on the street below. Avenue B. And then a burst of music, a solo jazz saxophone. Someone must have opened the door to the cafe down below, the Old Reliable. In his mind there came the feel of that small stage drifting under the smoke, the

red flood lights, the odor of milling blacks, and for a while he simply stood and tried to listen to the music; but he couldn't follow the thread, and suddenly it ceased. In its absence he felt alone, separated.

In the black Clayton could feel the heavy clouds low over the city. As he sniffed the air he experienced his first doubt. It was going to rain. He could smell it. But then he smiled, almost laughed, and thought, what possible difference could it make? The tarred gravel roof was dark with close rectangulars. A maze of wires crossed over the spaces between the small closed shapes. Clay leaned over to avoid the wires and started across the roof. He was almost to the wall facing onto the street when he tripped and a sharp pain jabbed him just below his right knee. It was a capped metal pipe about a foot high. The pain flushed over him like warm water as he bent over and pulled up his pantleg. He couldn't tell if he was bleeding or not. He laughed loudly, "What the hell are pain killers for anyway?" But his voice disturbed him. It hadn't sounded like his and it had seemed so quickly swallowed up. He stood suddenly quiet and trembling. His first thought was to run, but he knew there was no place he could run to. "Where, little buddy?", he asked himself. And although something inside kept wanting to break and run, kept up a kind of feeling that said, this time it's different Clay,

it's different, he had expected it, he granted it nothing. It was a feeling he had dealt with often enough, often enough.

He had thought about how it was going to be. For almost two weeks, almost from the day Jeela had left, he had thought of nothing else. Now the stubbornness that was his strength took possession of him. He swished his thin hand through his loose, blond hair. Then, his jaws set, his fists clenched, he moved swiftly toward the chest-high parapet. It was like the fight in Birmingham, he thought, getting started was the hard part, you have to make up your mind and then just do it. He concentrated on the day of that fight. He had gone to the back lot of the A & P grocery knowing that his chances were not good. Clay remembered him: the name was Thompson, easily six-three, the way he had come out of the grocery removing his apron, how he had looked down on Clay, his greasy black hair combed straight back into a stiff duck. He was so sure of himself unclipping his bowtie, taking off his starched white work shirt, the way he laughed and handed over his three false front teeth, his reward for a spring vacation gang fight in Panama City, Florida. Under the lunch hour summer sun the dimes in his penny loafers glared up like extra eyes as Thompson went into his crouch, began dancing around and jabbing the air. Clay had stood in the center of the circle

of onlookers and simply stared, his hands at his sides, as though he held this large and dangerous animal on the end of an invisible tether, watching with the fascination of one who already knew in advance what was about to happen, whose only interest seemed to be in when it would happen.

Clayton Morgan reached up and felt along the bridge of his nose. It was still slightly crooked from that first blow. His fingers were tingling, his nose felt strangely puffy and cold. Across the street on another roof top someone lit up a cigarette. Another suicide? The thought went through him and he laughed and knew he was in control of himself. It was the same way he had felt after Thompson had hit him, a strange sense of exhilaration taking over. And when a pigeon whirred to a perch not fifteen feet away he did not turn to look. His eyes had turned inwards on Thompson's face hovering over him, Thompson laughing with that hole in his face, laughing, his tongue touching the empty sockets and daring Clay, daring him to get up again. And up he came. And wiping the blood away they began again the circling, no longer testing but hitting out with all that was in them and hoping for the blood to show. And then that look on Thompson's face, the recognition that Clay would not stay down, that look of bewilderment edged with anxiety. And as Thompson turned to plead with someone to stop the fight before he had to kill Clay, Clay had

rushed him swinging and felt his first solid blow catch Thompson in the throat, heard somewhere in the distance a terrible gasping for air, and felt Thompson's face going wet under his fists as many hands began dragging him away.

The pigeon suddenly throbbed with the sound of beating wings and Clay turned almost beginning to back away. A voice clamored once, this time it's different, and ceased. Clay stared and the bird, its smooth black head turning around, stared back. It seemed completely unafraid. A thread of jazz hit the air and died. Clay looked up toward the heavy clouds and said, as if to the bird, "Going to rain tonight."

Suddenly and again, loneliness swept over him and Clayton Morgan was afraid. No, he thought, don't let it be this way, and he struggled against something that seemed to come from within. He held up his hands. They were shaking. "Come on, make a good ending of it," he said. He willed them to be still, and then reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He started to look through it, then changed his mind. There was no point to it. He flipped it over the wall and smiled at the thought of how long his wallet would remain unnoticed on the street below. Not long at all. Only a body now, a body with no identity found on a roof top in New York City. It was a comfort to him.

Now, he thought, now. He reached for the razor blade in his inside coat pocket. Touched it. It felt small and meaningless, more of paper and cardboard than steel. His fingers fumbled over the wrappings. It was the pain killers, he decided, they were making him feel tired, almost numb. And suddenly he knew that what had to be done must be done quickly. He felt he was losing control over his body. It was as though the darkness were jelling around him.

At the first touch of the blade, at the sting of its entrance, he closed his eyes and then pressed down hard. There was barely any pain at all. He opened his eyes and there it was between his finger and thumb, the blade half-buried into his wrist. Then almost as if another had had come to steady him, he watched as from a great distance a stranger's hand begin the severing of his life. The wrist seared white and burst into a dark red that was more black than red. His left hand abruptly lost all sensation. The nerves, he thought, I've cut through the nerves, and stared down at his limp left hand. It just hung there, not his, attached to him somehow crookedly and wrong. Then unexpectedly, a problem of practical implications. With no left, how to sever the right? But his fingers would not take hold and he dropped it. Enough, he thought, the left pumps well enough, all that's required.

Clayton leaned against the wall. He watched the

blood welling up over his wrist, spread out over his arm and hand, a small trail down over his fingers. He remembered the floating staircase he had seen in Montgomery in Jeff Davis's home, that delicately balanced architectural feat whose strength depended on the placement of each step of the spiral around an invisible core. And that was what his life was like, Clayton thought, only something had gone wrong in the design somehow, one board misplaced, something off-center in the structure, something warped, and now the pieces were coming apart. He was ruined. He was beyond repair.

Clayton turned and looked out over the wall. Then he smiled weakly for himself. He still had a good right hand. He used it to light a cigarette. As his match popped against the rough cement he watched the pigeon stretch and prune one wing. For a moment he thought he saw touches of purple and then green. The match went out. The neon signs reflected up from the street. Everything appeared to stand still, the way it had been before he had come here, the way it would be when he was gone, a kind of hulking permanence that had always seemed to lie somewhere just beyond his grasp. Then, from the building top across the street, a lit cigarette began a high long arc out away from the building. And as it lost the grace of its momentum, the cigarette fell into the wind shedding sparks all the way to the street.

Clay looked across to the other roof top. It remained dark. A slow helpless disquiet settled over him. It felt like something had gone wrong and he couldn't, didn't understand, and panic surged under his ribcage. He turned his back to the wall and began slipping down to a squatting position. He was cradling his left arm like a wounded child. The wrist, opened, the blood dripping warmly down his side. So much blood, he thought, all over me.

A sudden clear desire not to die swept over Clayton Morgan. It came with such strength that before he could stop himself his legs began to shake, and had he not already fallen to a sitting position he would have made a run for the door. Then, for several long moments he had wanted desperately another chance, not to die but to begin over again. He sat rigidly still. It was as though all the balance of his life had gone out of him, and he felt himself falling, like he was inside some huge floating structure that had begun tilting in the dark. All his life it seemed he had been struggling against this feeling of falling. It was the same feeling he had known as a child when, before sleep, the world seemed to turn away from him, leaving him alone in his bed gripping the covers with both hands.

Slowly Clay returned to himself. He felt weak and shaken, but he could force himself to look at his wound, to

accept the fact of what he had done, to be willing to let the future go on without him. He reached out, touched his flesh, his arm and hand, once sound and perfect in all its hidden connections. The blood felt sticky and warm, almost pulpy.

Then he began to feel sleepy and stood up. Something in him that did not want to sleep yet. A thread of jazz sounded very far away. Jeela's face rose in him unbidden. What if they'd never come to New York? Clay remembered that night beside Turkey Creek, the two of them naked, touching each other's body. She had been the first to touch him with her tongue, her eyes following his hands, his own tongue reaching inside and touching her, softly, her thighs lifting and offering each taste, and never before had he known that sense of belonging so completely to another's touch. And later, the sudden feel of his desperation, his unwillingness to let her go when he saw her husband sitting in the upstairs window, waiting for her to come home.

Clay had wanted her the way a man wants something rare and fragile, not because he wants something back, but simply because she was there and seemed to call out to him to take her. She had had other affairs before him, but there was that difference about her. She had always remained innocent, untouched. She had told once that her experiences with men never really happened to her, but to

some other woman who was both her and yet not her. It was one of the many things Clay had never understood about Jeela. He struggled to reconstruct that night beside Turkey Creek, to keep out of him her face the day they took her back, that fragile child's face that had not recognized him, her blue eyes gone quiet and blank and sheared from any claim he could make on her. He remembered how they had laughed at the broken glass and beer cans they had had to clear away before placing the blanket down. Even then, that first night, she had seemed reaching out to find in him something he had been afraid he did not possess, some invisible core of strength in which she too could stand. And yet he had offered it as easily as he had taken her. He had pulled her to him there on the ground. It was in him, he had promised himself, enough stubborn strength to make it work. He had wanted her and, it made no difference she was married, he would have her. He had known it for a long time, long before ever reaching the point of speaking to her. And on that night, even in all the garbage surrounding them, they had discovered what he had felt all along. And they had made love believing that they owned each other. In his mind Clay could hear the soft pine popping in the fire, the sound of a beer can trapped against a rock, the creek water purling and breaking downstream.

Jeela's face rises in him now and he sees her as she

had stood before him, waiting for him to accept her gaze, her eyes seeking him out, asking if he will accept the offering she is making of herself; and as he looks, a shadow seems to draw over her face; her gaze no longer greets his, not asking or waiting, not even recognizing him, but turning backwards toward some other time and place where he does not exist, security no longer needed, not even asked for, her eyes blue and empty and trapped smiling inside some different kind of dream.

The sudden drumming of wings seemed to come from within until Clay turned, knew that the pigeon had taken flight, and saw a man coming out of the door with a flashlight in his hand. He was searching for something. Clay stood up and stared as the stranger crunched across the gravel in his direction. The light wandered nearer and nearer until it settled on his shoes, stopped, and then moved up. There was a blinding light in his face. Clay instinctively lifted his hands to cover his eyes. The two of them stood in silence, the light holding them locked together in a kind of mutual discovery of something overwhelming and beyond the boundaries of words or movement. For long moments they stood just so, but then Clay felt himself beginning to crumble beneath the light. His arms grew too heavy to hold up in front of him. His back began to ache, his legs were shaking, his head throbbing from some

deep and inward heaviness, and he stumbled toward the light with a suddenness that meant he was falling.... Then the light was gone and Clay, who had somehow managed to stay on his feet, watched, from his awkward and stumbling posture, the light squeezed tighter and tighter around the edges of the door until at last the dark had sealed it shut.

Clay knew that he had passed out when he lifted his head, remembered where he was, and realized that he was the reason for the sirens and the growing intensity of noises coming from the street. It was then he thought of the stairwell. He struggled to his feet and moved across to the door. But once there his hand stuck to the doorknob, and he could not get it open. It was as though some inhuman strength held it closed against him. And when he finally did get it opened, and staggered inside, he felt he had crossed some dimensional barrier. He knew this place. Everything seemed to wait for him merely to step forward to complete what had already happened in some distant past. He realized the stairwell, not as though he were alive and standing above it, but as a memory, as something he had already lived through. And then the memory faded. The world became real again. He found he was having trouble standing. He heard them running on the stairs. He pulled himself up by the banister rail; but once up, everything began to spin. He knew that he was falling: he felt

himself turning around and over, upside down, the stairs falling away, the steps collapsing above him, falling and splintering, a deep mahogany brown whirling over him suddenly spinning outwards rushing toward a blackness, a mouth opening with three teeth missing, a black pigeon flying out of it, shedding sparks, a deeply familiar woman's face abruptly emptying into a shotgun blast, and blood red pellets streaking time lapsed and bending, becoming a long blinding column of light....

#

A sense of weightlessness hovers over him, that and a dryness in the back of his throat. He feels a need to swallow, but can not. For some time he lays there, breathing, feeling his body come back to him. His right hip and leg aches, but it is a pain that moves slowly about the edges of his consciousness. A desire to roll over on his side, but he does not try.

Suddenly Clayton Morgan realizes that he is alive and that he is in an ambulance. He feels vaguely aware of the two attendants up front, white coated men talking and smoking. A siren wails loud and meaningless, waves that crash over him in one long continuous shock.

Then he notices the thin rubber tubing attached to

his arm. It is not over. Pull the plug, he thinks, pull the plug and let it be over, his right hand fumbling but closing around the tubing, the rip of tape, the needle sliding under the body, the slow warmth collecting around him, over, let it be over, all sensation leaving him, a slow film of brown covering everything.

#

He has not yet opened his eyes for there is, within him, like the conscious sleep of one who knows that the morning has already begun without him, a deep inward pool of darkness that warms and holds him. He does not know where he is and he does not care. He feels inside an ever widening peacefulness, and everything is as it was, and as it should be. He begins to hear for the first time the rain striking softly against a window pane somewhere behind him. As he listens to it he imagines he can smell the wetness in the air, and then suddenly he is awake.

The room is so white he, at first, takes it to be a dream. But he knows that it is not. His eyes turn slowly toward a large bottle of plasma. It drips through a long brown tube that ends in his arm. Then he notices the cast on his leg, the restraints binding his arms, the thick mound of bandages across his left wrist. He stares down the

length of himself, bound, and feels himself wanting to float upwards. He feels his body has no weight. It is as though the restraints are being used to keep him from lifting from the bed. The sound of the rain gusting against the window fills his consciousness. The ache in his leg and hip is almost a comfort to him; it crosses through him like distant waves, touching his mind and then receding, something heavy with substance that rises and falls and holds him stable against his weightlessness.

He closes his eyes and in his mind he is riding a loud, metal-wheeled hay wagon. He is on his back on the top of the pitched load. He does not hear the nurse when she enters and begins checking over his chart. She is a student nurse who has just come on duty. As she reads over his chart, her eyes glance toward her patient with a warmth and a concern that has a lightness about it. She realizes that he is conscious and begins to take his pulse, and then to check his blood pressure. Clay opens his eyes at her touch, but he does not see her. In his mind he is still on the hay wagon and he has seen that he is going to pass beneath the upper limbs of an apple tree. But though he has begun to reach for the apples, he is beginning to lose the vividness of his memory; and the nurse is moving in, her words coming out of nowhere. She speaks, gently,

"You're lucky you know... your veins collapsed."

And he nods as he reaches for an overburdened limb that is moving beyond his grasp; and no sooner has he taken hold of it than the wagon has moved on, the limb pulling at him, his fingers seeming unwilling to function, to take hold of even one of them, and a voice, insisting, insisting that he answer,

"What's your name?"

"Apples...."

And he had one, the voice again, doubting, insistent for a response,

"What's your name?"

"Apples...."

And suddenly he has grown quiet, his eyes smiling, then closing, and he moves on toward the barn and into sleep.

The young nurse watches over him. She reaches down, pulls the top sheet up across his chest, and tucks it tightly under his mattress. She moves around his bed and takes up his chart again. After recording the results of her examination she hesitates. His face is smooth, an air of peace in his quiet breathing. She makes one last entry on the chart and backs to the door. The sleeping form drifts. The rain continues its slow drumming against the window pane.

A DARKER ROOM

Birmingham, Alabama, 1952.

Mama Newton was wearing her ankle-length black dress, dressed for town. She had said goodbye to her husband, but now she hesitated as if she might retrace her steps back to his chair. She stood in the shade under the eaves of their house and half-lifted her hand to wave, but he was not watching. He was looking out over the city toward Red Mountain. Her hand came back to her side. She turned, walked down the grass driveway, and was gone.

It was the first day he had been left alone. He was sitting in the backyard, his head and chest still swathed in bandages, catching the sunlight beside the fishpond. He watched the sun bleed toward the west, the industrial haze low over the valley. His eyes wandered over his backyard, convalescent, seeing and yet not seeing: the stump beside the garage that had been a fig tree, the rotted-out oak that had cast deep shadows over a green yard, his black buick sedan crumpled like something beaten and mutilated, sitting there like a display of things gone wrong-- that

anyone could have been in it and survived. He stared and the bright silver holes seemed to spin out from the front fender.

He leaned back and noticed it the moment he looked: the garage, a whole section of the tin roof had not been nailed down properly; it would blow loose with the first heavy storm. He sat for what seemed a long time and stared at it. His mind wandered. He remembered his father. It was the day of the funeral. His father had wanted him to go, but he had refused, and his father had stood there before the barn something growing in him fixed and permanent. His father had come down from the house still wearing his straw hat. It had seemed an odd thing, his wearing the straw hat with his black suit. He remembered the anger in his father's face, the way his father had turned away from him and walked stiffly toward the house. He had hated the old man that day. He had fled into the barn and thrown himself through the crib's doorway into the rich dark smell of leather and grain, into the gloom of wasp nests, into his own sour wretchedness that would soon take him out of Bridgeport, and out of the childhood he forsake at the age of fourteen. He had never returned. His father had disowned him.

His eyes came back to the roof. He looked away, pained. A breeze carrying the scent of rain passed over

him. He turned and stared. Then his 62-year-old washed-out face flushed red with the thought of it. He would repair it himself. He stood up on shaky legs and waited for the dizzy spell to pass before he entered the darkened garage and returned with the hammer and nails. His legs were trembling as he positioned the ladder and put one foot up. Then he climbed one step at a time, one foot in front of the other, holding on in long unsteady pauses to let the air into his damaged lungs, but going on stubbornly, his will to do for himself pushing him up and up until his old body could rest at the top. Then it passed over him as a shock that he had left the nails on the ground, all that effort, useless without the nails on the ground. He considered giving up, going back down, asking someone to do it for him, but, no, he could do for himself. He placed the hammer on the hot tin surface, pulled himself together and began the long climb down, his legs and hands shaking, each step an effort, all the strength of his will.

Once down he stared at the sack of nails with the pain, the foreknowledge of the nausea that would come with the bending over. Again, hesitation held him suspended between giving up and finishing the job; and even as he hesitated the struggle ended. The shaking of the ladder, the vibrations of his trembling, the hammer slipping closer and closer to the edge, and then hanging suspended between gravity and

friction until it tilted over and fell. When it struck the back of his head, the old legs gave up their strength at once, and he fell there beside the ladder, beside the hammer, the blood drying a dark stain on the ground.

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Papa Newton rose up on one elbow and looked around. The room seemed familiar somehow. The thick smell of honeysuckle drifted through the open window. He felt too hot and threw back the covers. He had been sweating and was wet through and through. His long-johns clung to him, cloying, disturbing. Across the room an old woman was sleeping. He climbed out of his bed and stood up. The room became a blur and he sat back down. He stared across the darkened room at the old woman. She looked familiar, his aunt maybe, his father's sister. No, it was someone else. He remembered a death, his father in black, bent over in the late afternoon sun, a single file procession of people moving like shadows over the ridge into the cemetery. He forgot it and stood up again. His legs trembled under him and he willed them to stop trembling. At first they would not obey him. He clenched his hands into fists. Began walking. And slowly the legs worked the way he wanted. He knew this house. He made it to the bathroom without a

search. As he undressed, his body seemed constantly on the verge of betraying him. He fought to make his movements precise. The steam poured around him and he stared down into the tub. Had he turned the water on? He reached a hand up to his head and felt the thick bandages. He started to rip them away, but the contact of his hand pushed a blackness across his mind and he forgot everything except his pain. He found himself sitting on the bathroom floor listening to the water gush from the faucets. He was naked, his body wet and slippery on the bathroom tile. He felt a terrible need to get out of there and pulled himself to his feet, groped his way toward the door.

Leaning back against the closed door he felt safe. He bent forward and breathed heavily. Then abruptly he straightened up and listened. Behind him, the sound of running water spilling onto the floor. A sudden fear went through him. He had to get out of there. He had to get back home. The screen door swished softly behind him as he waded out into the moonlight. Somehow he knew which way he was going and he didn't question it. He was going home. In his mind he was running.

The damp grass still cool on his bare feet, he stopped at a backyard gate and stared up at a huge full moon. He felt much better now. He knew what he had to do. And yet there was something that worried him. A face kept com-

ing to him, soft and blurred, and then angry, scowling. In the distance a train whistled. And he was moving again, down the alley, dim lights lighting the sky off to his right, bent over and awkward, a naked pale white thing in the dark.

Small stones and pieces of glass cut at his feet. From time to time he wondered what had become of his shoes, but he did not stop or look down. He moved slowly, from alley to alley, moving south, ever inward toward the streets of downtown Birmingham. He passed the one-square-block of Jewish cemetery, and then he was stopped. A well-lit intersection to cross. The moon was high and small, behind him now. He stood in the shadows and listened. Car lights loomed up and whipped past. Footsteps were approaching. He hesitated, unsure of himself, and then he was running, a great awkward crane struggling to hurry, suddenly white-framed in oncoming lights, and then the haven of another alleyway.

He fell back against a building and nearly collapsed. He was exhausted. The air he breathed tasted like ash. He wanted to lie down and sleep. He knew his feet were ripped and bleeding, but he could barely feel them. Sleep, if only he could sleep, but something was building in him again. He moved forward, haltingly, a slow motion wraith stumbling from shadow to shadow. Again, a train called from the dark, and he knew he could not stop. He had to get to the rail-

road. He knew which freight to catch. He had to get home. Already he could see it, his father's house, the orchard trees around it, the hillside pasture, the high gray barn, and there was the path that would take him to them. His brothers and sisters would be waiting. His mother: he could almost feel her arms around him. And there would be the chores he had left undone. He would have to catch up. He would fix that leak in the barn. He would make it all up. It would be as if he had never left....

He entered a shop-filled street in a trance. An apparition moved in the windows beside him. The street lamps flickered above him. And then he saw it. It came from his left, something white, quick and flat. He stopped and turned. Stared. Moved towards it. And suddenly it reached for him, the mouth opening, toothless, and it screamed, a sound like choking, the bandaged head rearing, the wild owl eyes closing over him. His arms flailed, the ancient body burning red and stretching out for him, the hammer blows, the deafening hammer blows. He twisted, fighting for air, for release, the withered legs and genitals, and sinking to his knees, it let him go. He lay there in the center of the circle of light from the street lamp, and then his hands moved up over his face, his legs twisted under him, and a cry began, a palsied wail against the fear

that was shaking him, a wail that had no beginning or end, that rose and fell like a flashing red light, like a siren in the darkness that closed over him.

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The old woman held his hand as they turned off the highway onto the dirt road. There was something about her that he dimly recognized and accepted as her right to touch him. He allowed her to care for him. She reminded him of someone. He wasn't sure of whom, but it didn't make any difference. Something more important worked inside him constantly, something he had left undone, a face, someone who needed him. He leaned back and sweat ran under his shirt. The windows were rolled up to avoid the dust roiling over the car. It rose and then fell over the thick, brown-covered pines and underbrush. The car moved as through a tunnel. His round white head rolled back, his eyes closed, and his face moved again with the struggle that slowly was claiming him, slowly, in the dark, in his dream of a naked old man reaching out to take him; and somehow, each time he woke, he knew he had only narrowly escaped.

He jerked awake. Outside there were flat wide fields of dust-covered cotton plants; and then at the edge of a green-thick, vine-covered mat of trees, he could see a sor-

ghum mill: a mule moving in a predescribed circle, two men in straw hats, a heavy black smoke rising abruptly into a blue sky. Then they turned left and he remembered. That left turn. They had entered his road. This was his property. He owned it. He sat erect and looked around. This was all his, his farm. He jerked around and stared at the old woman beside him, but her face betrayed no emotion whatsoever, as calm as bone. He started away.

The house rose up on square-built brick legs, black, the faded tar paper revealing the boards beneath, the tin roof weathered to a dull gray. Papa New accepted the sight of it like a trunk of old and familiar clothes. There was a complete row of yellow tulips in front of the house, ringing the porch; and there was his rocking chair, still there, and the path across the culvert down to the barn. A broad sense of peace began to settle over him. It was like he had been away and come back, and though he couldn't remember from where, he didn't care. This was his house. Immediately he wanted to go inside and assume possession.

There would be no electricity. He wouldn't allow it. And the yellowed wallpaper would continue its slow fall from the corners of the ceiling, but, for a time, there would be evenings, the kerosine lanterns casting wide circles of light, alive with moths and mosquitoes, and the hard-shelled

beetles clinging to the backs of screens. Papa would read again a week-old paper he had already read several times. Mama would be churning the milk from their two cows. And, for a time, there would be her strong even rhythm of hand and wood, and her seeming tireless strength to manage the days they had come to live again.

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Dawn, and in this September morning he watched the mists swirl thickly the length of his creek, the earth spongy and dark. He had walked the muddied path to the water's edge and then moved like a specter through the mist toward the pasture and his bottom land. In the quiet now he could hear the occasional flat tone of the cow's bell. He walked without hurry, and with his staff, a thick dried vine he had cut for himself, he poked at the rotted timbers as he passed.

He stopped where an old logging bridge had stood. It lay collapsed and sinking under the water. The water was high, backed up, bloated with swill. The creek seemed to flow in reverse, and brown, sawdust colored froth gathered and circled on the surface. He turned and started around the flooded muddy ground when a cottonmouth slipped from a limb off to his left. The hushed wet slap of its body

went over him like a chill. He stood for a moment and stared, the off-yellow shading visible across its throat, and then he stepped over a deadfall and blocked its path to the water. A log on either side, the moccasin backed, then stopped and coiled. There was a hollow snapping noise. The mouth gaped open displaying the white gullet. He stabbed at it with his staff and laughed, but no sound issued from his throat.

When the snake lurched forward the old man almost lost his footing as he stepped to one side, his staff crashing down on the tail, the snake writhing in a mass that abruptly disappeared down the bank and into the water. The old man stared. Nothing. The rings widened across the surface, bent, and then broke beneath the foam. Suddenly he was gasping. He could not get his breath. He staggered away from the water into a hollow of thorns and scrub and leaned back against a mossed-over oak. A heavy chest pain surged through him till he stood locked and rigid, his eyes glazed and staring out through the rising mist at a pale white sun hanging like something frozen that was melting inside him.

He rose from the ground and left the creek behind. Gradually the scrub turned to pine and he was walking on a path that moved parallel to the road. After a half-mile there was a place where only pasture grass separated him

from the road. He gathered burdock in his socks as he cut left away from the path. He crossed the barbed wire fence where a top strand was broken. Then he stopped and looked up for the house. The brown chert road curved at a quarter of a mile and there it was, black and closed against the high rained-out gray. Off to the right he could see swatches of sunlight and already he could feel the heat rising as in a green house.

He pulled his hat down tight and started out. The brim covered his eyes. His clothes were wet. They clung to him as he walked, drying to a wrinkled stiffness in the slight wind. In his mind there was no sense of the passage of time. He was leaning forward from the waist as if he were being pulled. And when he stumbled his pace quickened, his dignity preserved by momentum. His breath came harsh, a cold fire igniting in the exchange of air in his throat.

When he crossed the culvert and turned toward the house, he reared. Studied it. It was black and abandoned-looking. The porch posts were reinforced with two-by-fours nailed at crazy angles into the floor. He had forgotten his doing it. Concrete blocks were stacked together for steps; they tilted precariously apart. Why had it been allowed to happen? He was almost running when he reached the steps, spilled over then and fell cursing to the floor. He was on his feet faster than his age would seem to have

allowed. He heaved at the door. His father's face washed over him like shame. He jerked harder. It refused him. He began to back up, his hands lifting, waving in the air like animals suddenly turned loose. He spun around, reached up, grabbed his wet-stained gray felt hat and threw it to the floor. Began jumping on it. Stomping at it. A wildness taking him over, his hands waving, the thin white strands of his hair whipping at his reddened face. He stopped abruptly. Picked up the crumpled hat. Threw it into the yard. Turned toward his staff still lying where it had fallen on the floor. As he bent over his eyes became fixed, his face masked with urgency. A long stitch-marked scar was visibly pink along the upper side of his bare white head.

The twisted thick-gnarled handle of his walking staff curved through the glass. She said nothing but stood there and stared at him, watched him pass through the unlit living room into the darker room which served as their bedroom. And still she did not move, but stood as if transfixed by some inner knowledge which held her dumb and rooted to the floor.

Inside and the door closed behind him, the soft cur-

tained blackness assailed him with a quilted feeling that was close to suffocation. Each breath dragged a length of barbed wire down his throat. He was worried. The old woman was a mystery to him. He was afraid of her. When he had seen her something had risen in him dark and foreboding, opened like a wound that would not heal, like a grave, soft, the heavy sadness of a face that had wanted to comfort him, that bent toward him smelling of incense, of, of his mother's deathbed.... His heart surged up, a hammer under his ribcage. His mother's face, puffy and gray. His father's face, the anger in it. He had to get away, to escape, and she was still there. He could feel her presence behind the door. She was waiting on him. She had always been waiting. She would try to stop him. They had all tried. His father called. The echoes of his call seemed to spread out over the walls of the room. An urgency that would not be satisfied closed over him. He must get out. She was dying. Her voice called his name. He screamed, "I'm coming!", and started for the door. Stopped and backed away. Suddenly he was shaking. He felt he was drowning. His face twisted into a palsied look of terror; then his mind lost purchase and something broke free, disconnected and blank.

Slowly turning toward the corner of the room an edge of cunning exaggerated the look of surprise that had come over him. The solution. It had been there all the time.

His hands fastened over it like gears coming together in a perfect fit. Pain crowded up under his chest. He threw open the door and his mind slipped again. He was remembering a kitten he had held as a child that had nuzzled against his neck and sucked at his ear.

A shotgun pointed into her breast she backed down the porch steps, her square-heeled patent leather shoes finding each step with slow motion care. The hammer was cocked. His finger on the trigger. Still she did not speak, but her heavy-jowled sixty-year-old face had become rigid with anger. She backed onto the front lawn and he followed her, his eyes wide and unfocused, moving to her left. His breath came with quick sucking gasps. Sharp pain broke in his face. The gun tilted. Suddenly his eyes went empty, his face turned toward the sunlight falling through the gray. A bright green haze rose inside a yellow column of light.

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She woke and found the bed empty. Her sleep-heavy face clicked into wakefulness. She sat up, reached for her teeth, and slid from beneath the warm quilt. There was no

feel of him anywhere in the house. He was gone. Wearily she made coffee while she dressed.

She found him in his rocking chair on the front porch. It had happened sometime during the night. He was dead. She spread a blanket over him, walked to the nearest farm for a telephone, and called Bud, their oldest. Papa rocked until they came for him.