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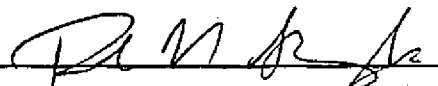
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "P. N. [unclear]", written over a horizontal line.

Date

December 13, 2006

WORKS OF MEN

A Thesis

Of Creative Writing

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree


The University of Mississippi

Paul N. Akin Jr.

December 2000

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Paul N. Akin Jr. entitled "Works of Men." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English and emphasis in creative writing.


Barry Hannah, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Aunw. Fisher-Winter
Cornell Stephens

Accepted for the Council:


Dean of The Graduate School

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of

Mr. and Mrs. N. H. Akin,

and to Mr. and Mrs. Roy H. Koger,

my grandparents,

who by their lives made it possible for me to do this.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Barry Hannah for his time and patience with my writing, for careful marks to show that a good story is as much about what is not said, and for teaching in such a way to remind that good stories reflect the bare wonder of being alive. He was professional about my work even when he suffered terrible health. I thank Steve Yarbrough for kind words that changed everything for me, for practical advice on publishing, and for gracious offers of help long past the scope of this thesis. Both have shown me through teaching and by their own stories that writing is as any other work worth doing—simple, honest, and hard. I thank Cynthia Shearer for her willingness to step in late and help me finalize the thesis, and for her insightful comments and kind encouragement. They've given me a vision to keep at it.

Deepest thanks are for my parents, Paul and Dorothy Ann Akin, who have loved me so well, no matter what. I thank my brother and sister, extended family, and several close friends. All mentioned here are tangible reminders to me of the simple mystery that God is.

ABSTRACT

True contentment is a thing as active as agriculture. It is the power of getting out of any situation all that there is in it. It is arduous and it is rare. It is the discipline of Epiphany.

— G. K. Chesterton

Each of these stories has something to do with the idea of epiphany, as I mean it, the appearance or manifestation of something that wasn't present before. The characters in the five stories all have something they are active about, which they are doing in the hopes of some measure of contentment. My interest was to pay attention to them in particular settings and make a realistic gesture towards an understanding which breaks through to them, transcends, in the end. All of them are set either in Lauderdale County, Tennessee, where my father's family lives, or in Memphis, where I was raised.

My hope was to realistically present the places I have known best and the people who have lived in them and made their own, to honor their manners and the deeper mysteries they point to, as Flannery O'Connor might put it. I am interested in what she called the writer's problem to operate "at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet." I think the power of the epiphany with which each of these characters meets succeeds or fails in how faithful I have been with those first two aspects.

Wendell Berry wrote to Wes Jackson in *Home Economics* that "To call the unknown by its right name, 'mystery,' is to suggest that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern that can be damaged or destroyed and, with it, the smaller patterns." This respecting of mystery points to religion, he says, and this writing was a struggle of faith for me, an attempt to honor by telling of this world and the hopes of the one to come. He also says, "If we are up against mystery, then we dare act only on the most modest assumptions,"

and I think anywhere these stories don't ring true, it suggests I didn't act modestly enough and tended toward explanation. Where they do work best, it was an unexpected moment for me, *grace*, as for the characters themselves.

In short, in writing them, I hope to learn better how to tell a good story.

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The Origin of Water

He sits on the hood of his pickup in the veil of early morning, feeling a light rain fall. The sun has barely broken the horizon and he can make out only shades of gray for the rice, black where it is woods, but he can hear the drops hitting ground, collecting until they run into the channels lining the field. He sits for thirty minutes or so, breaking the stillness with a thick sip of coffee, until clouds move and sun breaks clean over what looks like the end of the earth, off at the far edge of the flatness. Then he can see the green sway of his stand of rice, and the levees surrounding, full of murky water draining in ridged streams in even spaces where he made the cuts for water to flow. He slides from the hood, feels the wetness on the butt of his jeans when he climbs in the cab.

Mildredge Dander is awake and standing on the porch when he pulls into the half-circle gravel drive. Her arms are outstretched and straining above her head and he can see the back of her nightgown billowing where her spine arches away from it. His dog, Bo, peers from under the porch and lifts his head from his paws.

“A gift a mercy you’re a might better lookin than your name,” he says, slamming the truck door and kicking his boots against the concrete step to break the mud free. A clod falls near Bo and he sniffs it.

“You’re nice to say so. I expected you back in earlier maybe,” Mildredge says, tracing a barefoot line on the porch.

“I had to see what the rain would do.” He slides his arm around her and rests his palm on the flare at the top of her hip. He and Mildredge met four months ago at the

Lauderdale Country Club, during a wedding reception for his cousin Margaret and Tim Cooch. Mildredge walked up beside him from behind, where he stood watching couples two-step to fast country tunes on the hospital-tile dance floor, and took his hand in hers before he ever saw her, like they had been married for years. She said to him when he turned to see who it was, "So, who do you know here?" It had been that natural ever since, like two people who were close and then separated for a long time.

He never was good with women. But with her, because of that first night, he never had to be.

Last night he and Mildredge argued again, tight-fisted and well past dark. She brings it on, he thinks, trying to work Jesus up in between us now. She knows I don't take any stock in that. Leave it be.

A while ago, Mildredge told him she had become a Christian. "For real," she said, "not Sunday bible-toting to church and leaving it by the other six days." She says she is different now, changed. He knows one thing is different—they used to make love, the only he's ever known, that first month. Then she told him "I've been saved," and all he knows for sure is she's been saved from doing that for three months now.

Last night when he got tired of her sharing Jesus, he asked her, "If you've got Jesus Christ now, what do you think he would say about you spending your nights here with me?" He didn't say it to make her leave him—God, he doesn't want her to leave. He was sorry when Mildredge turned from him and he saw the tears run from her dark brown eyes—like a hand choking his heart—but it stopped them talking about faith and Jesus and the cloudy hereafter.

What he knows for sure is in his fields. The proper give and take of the land makes

sense to him—you put in, and likewise you take out. He always leaves her to cry when they argue, and he drives to the levee bank at the edge of his field in the darkness, sits on the ground so he can feel the earth with his hands, and listens to the shiver of rice in the night breeze until he can sleep.

Mildredge smiles and bites her lower lip as he climbs the last step to the porch. Her long nightgown dusts the unfinished planks and she leans her head into his chest and wraps a hand around the back of his neck to swirl a finger there. “Well, I’ve got to get to work. There’s some breakfast on the stove.”

He kisses her and says, “Thanks. I’ll call you this afternoon. Sorry, I mean, about last night.”

“Yeah, me too. Thanks,” she says. She hugs him tight and rubs her hand on the small of his back the way he likes. When she leaves a few minutes later, he walks to the camper-sized kitchen and draws back the shades on the double-paned bunker window above the sink. Drips of water pish on the sill when he slides the window open. The sun is up full now, draining the gray from the sky and unfolding the fields out back in vast slants of light. He can see from there the water-shine still on the short sheaths of rice, but the shimmer in the levees has already faded. The first rain in two and a half weeks and what fell this morning is already gone dry in the ground.

He clicks on the weather-band radio balanced in the sill against a flowerpot (one she gave him, to make the place look less practical, she said) and hears the high whistle of static before the deadlevel voice emerges, saying the cloudburst is moving on from Ripley and should set up over Nashville by noon. The voice tells that the National Weather Service

sees no developing stormfronts for the next week, maybe two.

He clicks the radio off and grabs the rubber hip-waders from a hook by the back door. If the moisture levels after this rain show too low by his figuring to make a good crop, he will call T.R. Fullman this afternoon and see what can be done to make the rain come.

Ever since he was little, he knew what water could do. A mud-brown wall of it had broken down the door to his bedroom and lifted him bed and all through the window at the head of the bed, legs and headboard snapped like matchsticks. There was no violence for him in it; the surge carried him on the soggy mattress a hundred feet from the house to rest on the levee bank of the rice field, bedsheets and water swirling roughly about his ankles. From there he watched the water evict the contents of the house. He still remembers the tilted swirl of the coffee table, how it spun so fast in the eddy, flinging heavy droplets from the top. And later when the flood cleared, how he and his father had to pry the table loose in pieces from the mouth of the well where it wedged like a bath plug.

After the flood, he became obsessed with water, charmed by its power. While the librarian at the Lauderdale County Library was first excited that a boy so young wanted to learn outside school, she soon realized it was only for this single subject, and he soon exhausted both her and the card catalog. It was then—when he and his father traveled to Memphis on Saturday afternoons to go to the huge Sears on Cleveland, where they could shop for “man things,” his father called them—that he asked to be dropped by the main library on Peabody to do more reading. His father was bemused.

He had taken one trip to the beach in his childhood, once since the flood. His father stood behind him in sagging trunks, pushing him with tanned forearms, stark white above

the elbows. "Don't you want to play in the waves?" his father asked. "We came all the way down here. Go on, you'll have fun." He worked his feet down in the sand and leaned back against the pushing hands. All that water stretching off to nowhere, ready to carry him away. He didn't put a toe in the whole week. But when a storm moved in on Friday, turning the Gulf to browned algae sheets and whitecaps, he sat for hours on the dune wrapped in his towel and watched the waves pound against the pier until the rain felt like it left scars on his face.

He longed to see water be, act out what he read. In high school he won a blue ribbon from 4-H, besting Tipton High's three-year champ Tom Pester by showing the meatiest Angus bull raised from a calf. When the farmer-judges asked him what the secret was—enriched feed, pasture grazing, what?—he answered, "The feed is the same as for all them cattle," pointing a finger at the smaller black bulls blinking and chewing, "but this is the only that was watered proper."

The farmer-judges roared like they'd heard a joke with a dirty punch line they weren't expecting. One slapped him between the shoulder blades, still laughing, and pulled him close to whisper where all could hear, "I don't blame you, son. I wouldn't tell this bunch how I did it either!" He didn't see what was funny. He had hydration charts, careful ledgers, and they congratulated him again with new laughter when he held them forth. Tom Pester didn't get the joke either. Later on when they loaded up the cattle out back, Tom punched him in the mouth with his class ring on and the stone facing out.

*

A week later, Mildred calls on a Wednesday afternoon when she gets home from work.

“Hey, you busy?”

He cradles the phone with his chin, searching the fridge for lunch. “No,” he says.

“I just came in from checking the fields.”

“How does it look?”

“No better, a lot worse than yesterday really. Got to get some rain soon.” He picks up a jar of pickles and sees the “Sell By” date was early last month. He bites into one not as vinegar-smelling as the others and kicks back into his La-Z-Boy and wipes juice from his fingers onto the armrest. From where he sits, the dry brown of the ground out back blends into the dirty brown of the rice—rice that should be long and green by now.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” says Mildred. He can tell that she’s not just being nice.

That sound in her voice, her feeling a little of this uncertainty with him, makes his stomach jump.

“Thanks,” he says. “You coming over tonight?”

“Not tonight. I’ve got to be up early to drive to Memphis for work. Me and Bob Henrey have a meeting with the Convention Bureau down there to get some ideas for putting the Tomato Festival together.”

“Oh, okay. Then I’ll see you tomorrow?”

There’s a pause before he hears her say anything. “I don’t want you to be upset. I don’t think I can come over to stay anymore. Not for now, at least.”

“Oh.”

“Are you mad?”

“No,” he says, too quick. He feels like he’s mad at somebody.

“It’s just, I, what you said to me about staying over. I’ve been thinking about it, praying some. I don’t want you to see me like that, talking one way and doing another.”

He wishes he could take it back—her and Jesus and him in bed together, back—erase it.

“You were right,” Mildredge says. “I can’t even tell you why it’s wrong for sure, I just don’t feel right.” Now he can tell from her voice she’s been crying before this. He wants to say the right thing, anything. “I still want to be with you,” she says. “I just don’t know exactly how right now.” She tells him she’ll talk to him soon, and that she’s praying for him, and for some rain.

“Thanks,” he says, “but I think I’ve got something to take care of that.”

She tells him she loves him before she hangs up. He doesn’t like nights of sleeping alone. When she’s not there, he is given over to the dream of that same wall of water crashing in the door and carrying him away. In his sleep the bed doesn’t come to rest, and when he jumps off to solid ground, it feels like the land is moving underfoot, the firmness of earth awash on a vast and mighty sea. That dream has always ended the same, him waking face down and clutching the edges of the mattress with curled fists.

When Mildredge is with him it isn’t like that. The flood doesn’t come and thoughts are only of her and of his life now. If he’ll ask her to move in. How much rice to grow, when it should be irrigated. He likes thinking on things he can make sense of, or wonder at because of goodness.

The day of the flood, his mother died and he did nothing to try to save her. He sat

atop the levee and watched the house, hoping that she would pour forth to safety, cradled as he had been by the rush of foam. He hugged his knees and rocked back and forth, sobbing, and chanting in whispers, please come out, please come out. When his father returned an hour later from the feed store, the pigs he planned to feed were already bloating where they floated dead in the drainage ditch at the front of the yard. He remembers two big sows slung across the highway like a pair of plump gray dice. His father climbed out of the truck at the highway and waded out to where he sat crying on the levee hill, asking only, "Have you seen her?" The boy rocked the faster and did not answer. His father said, "Stay here," and pushed his way through the flow to the open front door of the flooded house.

He didn't know where his father found her. All he knew was what he saw of her at the funeral home, and that was not his mother. He peered over the edge of the casket at Parson & Sons and saw what they said was her—a body with makeup on the face, too-rosy cheeks and too round. Not real. He was afraid to let go his grip on the coffin's edge and reach in to brush her hand even for a moment, fearful that where he touched would soak his finger and cause water to pool on her skin.

His father never said another word to him about her death or that day. The older man still spoke of her lovingly and with fond remembrances; all the pictures of the three of them were still on the walls. He thought that maybe when his father died five years ago, some of the questions that her husband never asked about a rescue the boy never tried might be buried with him, alongside her. He had hoped the dream might die then too—him on his knees, gripping the rolling ground with clutched fingers as in the distance he makes out the crest of a wave, the pigs at the top, gray and squealing for a moment, then his mother, staring, unblinking—all coursing farther from the land where he clings—smaller

bodies—then black dots on a surging horizon.

*

Two weeks later there is still no sign of rain. The Mississippi has shallowed almost ten feet, hasn't crept along so low in the muddy banks for twelve years. The water stored in the reservoirs of his own design was finished five days ago. If no rain comes today, or tomorrow at the latest, his rice will not be worth the effort of cutting. He and Mildredge haven't talked.

He talked to Fullman weeks ago, revealed his plan for making it rain. Now he stands in the back yard waiting for Fullman to bounce down between the fields in his biplane—*The Terror of Three Counties* as Fullman calls it and has scrawled down the sides of the rusted fuselage. Fullman employs it for crop-dusting and enters it in airshows when the organizers are loose enough with safety regulations. A rudder once came loose and shot through the cafeteria skylight at Lauderdale County Elementary and made the principal envision tornadoes out of season, yelling to the screaming children for a duck-and-cover drill, lunchtrays over heads and bunched knees. Billie Fullman told her husband afterwards, "If you want to kill yourself in that thing, fine, but I'll be *damned* if you're gonna kill people's kids while they're at school." Now he can only fly over the fields outside town—unless Billie visits her mother in Dyersburg, then he's brave enough to do one wing-wagging streak low above Ripley's business district.

The old biplane bobs back and forth, unsure on the gravel road as it makes toward him, the streaked circle of the propeller blowing trash and dust in a weak tailwind. Fullman

flips the kill switch and lifts the grungy goggles to his forehead as he throws a leg over the scooped sill of the cockpit to climb down. “At sky looks good. Good day for it.” He jabs a thumb back up over his shoulder like a hitchhiker. “Got some big fluffy clouds makin thisaway.”

Fullman is in his sixties but passes for forty. He has been shaving his head bald since sometime in his twenties and hangs out down on the edges of the square with people half his age. Fullman likes youth; he exudes it and wants to be near it and usually shows it up with his fierce energy, housed in a squat body knotted and powerful as a fist. His eyes, swirling blue like a child’s marble, sit deep under shaven brows and have almost no white rounding them.

“Yesir, Mr. Fullman. I saw them moving right early this morning. You’re sure your plane will do this?”

“Do this? Why hell yes, son. I don’t know if it will *work*, but she’ll get your stuff up there, sure as rain.” Fullman rubs the back of his car with a thumb and forefinger and snorts a laugh. “Sure as rain. I guess that’s what you’re counting on, ain’t it?”

“Yesir, reckon so.”

He waves for Fullman to follow him to the shed where he has the attachments he made for Fullman’s plane.

“You sure bout *this*?” Fullman asks.

“Yesir. I’m sure,” he says. He scoops a handful of the clear pellets from one of ten massive plastic bags and lets them roll between his fingers. He’s never seeded clouds before, but like everything else surrounding water, he has studied it. The two of them hoist the first of the two long cylinders of pipe, big around as manhole covers and six feet long, on their

shoulders and carry them out to the biplane, rusted and frowning on the dirt road.

He wrenches the white pipes to the crop-dusting nozzles on the bottom of each wing and thinks to himself the only chance for error now is the pilot, and, well, the plane. Both big question marks. He explained to Fullman in simple terms, weeks before now, that this will be just like crop-dusting, only he has to get high enough to dust the clouds instead of the furrowed earth.

Fullman climbs back into the cockpit after the pipes are loaded with seed and gives him an angular military salute as the engine turns and catches, hacking black clods of smoke from the rusted exhaust mounted atop the fuselage like a tractor's. A shotgun-sounding blast smacks the hot blue air as the plane lurches forward, flushing a tattered pair of Canadian geese from the shadowed treeline. When he sees the thick pvc pipes almost dragging the ground under the bottom wings, he has a vision of Fullman pulling hard to lift off and plastering himself on the side of the barn.

The fading plane taxis to the end of the rice fields, symmetrical on either side of the raised and leveled access road Fullman uses as his runway. The plane careens in a half circle and turns to face him, one more black blast clouding in the sky as Fullman throws the throttle forward and slowly builds speed. The wings wave back and forth, threatening to capsize right and then left into the roadside levees under their burden. He feels his stomach knot up and fears having to explain to Billie why Fullman is now a stain on his barn.

When the plane shoots by, he sees Fullman can't make it unless gravity is suspended, but Fullman smiles and gives another salute. Then the biplane finds extra power somewhere and gives a whine that launches the whole sorry blur of rust and pipes forward with a fluid although graceless speed. He spins to watch the plane jump from the earth as if winched up

by rope at the final second, banging its tailwheel on the barn's tin roof as the wings pitch against the trembling blue sky. A clear, wild scream streams back to him, the plane turning in a broad semicircle to the horizon where a white cloudbank sits thick like cotton, flat as a ruler along its sprawling bottom edge.

Fullman makes three, four, five, trips as the morning wears on. This has to work, *has to*, he thinks. He can't see Fullman up there, but he hears now and then the tired buzzing of the engine, a groggy bee-swarm hum. He's staked the whole of his profits from last season on what he paid to seed the clouds. He stands in the back yard with arms crossed for two and then three hours, watching for signs that it will come. He can't hear Fullman anymore.

The huge cloud is now full overhead and passing fast. He rubs the back of his neck, tired from the strain of looking up, and drags a used Treflan drum from the barn to sit on. The white sides are spattered with dirt from a rain long past. He sits there with elbows resting on his knees and looks at the parched brown grass at his feet—stunted, dead. His eyes trace the curve of the toe of his boot, the scuff marks all around the tip, the faint mist of dust layered on the rough brown leather. He stares at the ground and spits, and thinks of Mildredge.

Their arguing started when she would tell him about what she read in her bible. She tried to get him to read it, but he told her, "I've read it before," and he said he didn't need to read things he didn't believe or didn't know for sure. It was part truth. He'd started to read it when he was young, from the first page. The minister from Aunt Gertrude's church told him after his mother's funeral that reading it would help him understand better what happened, to cope with "the unfathomable mysteries of God's ways to us," the man said. So he tried to read it then. When he read about Noah and the ark and the flood, it didn't

read like they had told him in Sunday school. It was far more immense to him, far more terrible. The water covered everything, wiped everyone out except for a few in that ark. The words that made him angry, confused, the words he wished weren't there on the page at all said that God had done it because he looked around and saw that there was nothing but wickedness, that the men of the earth were wicked, and all the ways of their hearts wicked too. He never made it past that.

Sitting there, staring, thinking, he doesn't see the first one when he hears it. But he watches the second hit the tip of his boot with a dull pat and pool the dust there in a small, dirty circle. The third thick drop lands at the base of his neck, fat and satisfying when it wets the skin between the balls of his shoulders.

A boom echoes then, a low *pound* remote and gigantic, like all the furniture of heaven banged against the walls of the firmament. He raises his head and looks above to see flickers in the clouds, depth charges of flash and sound. The cloudbank is streaked through with gray and flattened, tensed to act. The booms are overcome by a single, crisp crack, and at the far corner of the first field one incandescent bolt slices the darkened sky, clouds to treetops. The one stripe of fire seems to unhinge a curtain of rain, end to end. The drops hit scattered throughout the rice and thicken until the whole of parched earth sounds crumpled like paper.

He unbuttons his cotton shirt, pulls the shirttail from his jeans and dabs the rain from his face. He wads the soggy shirt and lets it fall, running toward the field, stumbling, catching himself by a hand muddy from ground already slick.

He dangles one leg into the levee and follows with the other; between his booted feet he watches the water begin to rise and flow. Rain pours in sheets and he wipes his eyes

with the length of a bare forearm in an effort to see. He turns his face upward to the dark underbelly of the sky, lets the rain pelt on his eyelashes, his nose; savors for minutes the steady drip off his chin. Water runs in channels down his spine as he leans forward, down the butt of his jeans. He feels the squish beneath him, and at his feet now, absorbed into his socks through the soggy leather where water has climbed the levee and swirls with speed.

When he feels the hand on his naked shoulder he doesn't jump.

"Can you believe it? Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah, it is," he says. "It is."

He climbs to his feet and turns and sees Mildredge through the pelting rain, laughing, her arms outstretched, a red gingham dress stuck as skin to her small, hard body. He wraps his arms about her and pulls her close and she laughs. He squeezes her tight and laughs too. The earth beneath him now seems wet and full and fixed in place.

The feeling lasts for a couple of days until Mildredge calls him again. He had been standing by the back sliding glass door where the house offered the best view of his new-green fields when the phone rang. She asked him how the rice looked now and he found himself answering "magnificent" and "gorgeous," words he never said. She told him again how she really had been praying for him and praying for rain and that she still couldn't believe God answered her prayer so soon.

That made him a little angry, but it was when she asked for the baptism he felt confused, where he knew it to be clear, simple. "That's why I wanted to ask if you'd let the preacher baptize me there in your field," she said. "It made so much sense to me when I thought about it."

He reminded her, as gently as he could, he thought, how he seeded the clouds, how Fullman had dumped load after load of the clear pellets into them. He told her the whole story—the plane buzzing up there unseen, and then the rain. She answered, “Yes, I know all that,” with such a surety, such confidence that his anger surprised, even frightened him. All he said then was, “Yeah, fine. If that’s what you want to do.”

*

He stands now, Sunday morning, on the gravel access road between the fields. The preacher was so excited when she asked about having the baptism out there, he canceled the morning service. He stoops and picks up a rock from the road and slings it sidearmed into the field where it makes a fat thud in the still soaked dirt. The levees are full all around where he hasn’t needed to turn the water loose, it rained so much.

The day is already a brilliant blue, the orange-yellow sun nailed to the center of the clear sky. He bends and scoops a handful of gravel into his hand, hearing it scatter like buckshot against the rice when he throws it. He walks to the barn and takes his hip-waders from a hook next to the broken freezer he uses for a file cabinet. He slides into the rubber legs and hooks the suspenders over his shoulders as a van marked *Bethel Springs Baptist* idles by, framed in the open mouth of the barn, eight cars trailing.

The van and cars brake and stop in a line on the road between the fields. The van’s side doors swing open and those of the following cars after, men in suits and women in dresses with hose and shoes ill-suited for the field stepping from them. He sees the preacher shade his view with his hand, looking for him. The preacher lifts a hand when he sees him

and strides to greet him, elbows flailing from his sides in hurried motion, shirtsleeves rolled above his forearms, ready to get to work.

“Mightyfine, mightyfine of you to let us use your place on this occasion. I do thank you and hope we can return the hospitality by having you to our church sometime. Oh, name’s Ronnie Elder.” The preacher extends his hand.

“How do. You’re welcome.” The preacher is a short slight man with a shock of dark hair jutting out to a point atop his head, swept back on the sides. This man smiles like he ate a lemon, he thinks. When he offers his hand, the preacher grabs it and pulls it down toward him in an obnoxious sawing motion, smiling and pumping hard. “Well, shall we begin?”

“Fine.” He is not looking at the preacher now, but over his head to the van, and doesn’t notice Elder turn on his heels and march away again. The passenger door swings open and he sees the shapely calf and bare foot extend to the gravel. She wears a long, plain dress, stark white punctuated on the mud-brown road.

She sees him and a slender smile shapes her cheek; she waves a lifted forefinger. Mildredge does not move to him, but follows the preacher when he passes and offers his arm. He feels that confused pang again, stabbing and angry, when she takes the preacher’s arm and turns. Elder waves his hands above his shiny head, beckoning the small congregation to huddle around. After a minute of bowed heads, the crowd scatters from him and gathers along the edge of one of the levees, looking down on the rice in a cluster like a choir, three deep and ten wide. The group splits for a second near the middle, allowing Elder and Mildredge through to inch down the bank, in among the green shoots. When Elder has his feet worked down in the mud, he lifts his blunt forearm above his head

again and motions for him to come.

The congregation breaks into a hymn, voices high and strained, mixed among the bristle of rice and the rush in the trees further back. He scrabbles down the incline from the road into the rice stand and makes past Mildredge and the preacher, leaving a faint spoiled trail in the center of the green where he moves, his hands palms down so the heads of rice brush his fingertips. Phrases, broken pieces of the singing glide to him on the crisp breeze. *There is a fountain filled drawn from Emmanuel's veins* The toes of his boots dig easy enough into the soft dark of the levee hill when he reaches the far side and begins to climb. *Sinners plunged neath that flood lose guilty stains*

When he makes the levee top, Elder has his back to him speaking to the clump of people planted by the roadside like mismatched flowers. They are too far, muffled by the wind, for him to make out what is being said.

Elder and Mildredge turn and face his way now and he breathes in hard and full when he sees her smile on him. The preacher's tie flits over his shoulder in the wind, her long white dress flowing with the green. Elder waves his arm, sweeping back and forth, no longer frantic.

He straddles the sluice gate of the levee and heaves the heavy coated plywood board upward, pulling from his ankles to his shoulders in a squatting clean-and-jerk. The water masses and boils under the gate, and looking down, he watches it flood into the field, magnified through the wave of the rice. Elder and Mildredge brace as the flow hits them, her steadying herself with a hand on Elder's shoulder where his feet are planted. He watches the water move beneath him through the cut, the current and the color darkened by depth and the slick of chemicals staining the surface. When he sees the water reach near

Mildredge's mid-thigh he drops the gate and stops the stream.

The preacher's words he still can't make out clearly and he stands there on the levee with his arms crossed, level with the crowd on the road, watching. Elder moves and stands perpendicular to her, bracing a bent leg behind her and cradling her with one arm around the back, the other lifted, palm held up, inviting. The smile is gone from her face but it is not without expression. She is not looking at him. She is not looking at anyone. When Elder leans her back, he sees from the levee that her body gives no start or resistance or surprise. The water pulls the dress evenly beneath, and then her neck and face and all.

He stands on the hard top of the levee, not rocking on his heels anymore. He is holding his breath and waiting for her to surface. For him days and months and years are passing and she has not come up. The dream is real now and he is queasy with the thought that all the earth is fluid and moving again.

She pushes up from the water, again without a splash, and takes an even and full breath. He sees the sun making the water around her shine, and he stares at her, more beautiful, he thinks, in the soaked white gown. The congregation begins singing another hymn, and Elder shouts "Hallelujah!" and jumps up and down.

He sits down on the levee bank, feels the soft earth between his fingers, and looks out across the flooded field sparkling gold and green from the sun. He doesn't notice the congregation dwindling, leaving a few at a time, but he does look down to see Elder hug Mildredge and then wave to him and make his way off to the van. Mildredge turns and pushes her way toward where he sits, slowly, careful to part the rice before her as she moves. When she stops at the edge of the field where the levee begins to rise, he stands and edges down to stop just above her.

He thinks as he stands there, how is she different from anyone else now, from me? The water still glistens on her skin and in her hair, and the white gown sticks to her just as the red gingham did a few days before. But when he looks at her face, at her smiling at him, the way she looks at him is different, he thinks, calm. Mildredge offers her hand to him, upturned, and when he looks down at it, he sees for a moment his own reflection in the water of the field beneath her. He realizes that he can't remember ever seeing his face reflected in water before, and he likes the movement of it, the way the lapping surface changes his own features. When he looks at her again, he smiles before taking her hand and splashing down from the levee into the water beside her, and follows her when she begins for the far side of the field.

American Way

Through the space made where the two books leaned together, Blake could see Peggy Armbrust looking for him in the Remainders section. She always rushed, as if what she had before her to do was bothering her from getting to the next action-line on her manager's list. Peggy was only assistant manager.

Blake lost sight of her when she left Remainders and couldn't pick up her trail where he peered around the endcap at the edge of the Fiction section. When he turned and looked back down the length of his aisle, she was there and coming at him.

"Blake, I thought you were scheduled to straighten Remainders first this morning?" She plucked a pencil from her hair, hurdled his answer. "These shelves have to be spot-checked every day." She tapped a large edition of Steinbeck. "See, these gaps here have to be closed up. Use these bigger books with the nice covers for face-outs on that extra space, see, like this." Armbrust jammed the fat hardbacked *Grapes of Wrath* in the middle of a row of paperbacks, using her other hand to sweep open a space. "And dammit, carry a dustcloth when you do it. These are filthy!"

She made quick, scritch marks on her clipboard and looked back up at Blake as if he were a course made of obstacles to test her. "Now Blake, if you take what I've said to heart, you could be supervisor by the end of the month." She then affected a smile, where her Manager's Training Manual must have told her to put one, Blake thought, under Promoting Within.

"Corporate's approved it," she said. "I'm looking for that supervisor now." She ran

her finger along the shelf, smiled again, and walked through the Children's section to the Employees Only door in the back corner. Blake could hear her hum above the looped classical music piped through recessed speakers in the ceiling. She bumped the door open with her padded butt, which bulbed at the middle of her body like an apple lodged in an ostrich neck.

Blake pulled the Steinbeck loose and moved two paperbacks at the end to a lower shelf so the books wouldn't be packed so tight. He didn't care about being supervisor.

He passed a wide, flat cover facing forward on a shelf in How-To, a bearded man on it wearing a flannel shirt, power-tool in hand, his grin sure of fixing things. Blake folded a dustrag into his back pocket and walked the thin two-toned carpeting to the store's main entrance, where a line of five people faced the one open register and shifted on their feet.

"Man, thanks for coming up here. I got slammed all at once. You mind taking the phone while I ring these up? They's one holding too."

Blake said "Yeah, no problem," and took the receiver from Thinnacus. The hand extending the phone was large and callused.

"May I help you?" Blake asked, and a lady with an accusing tone said she knew Bookstar matched prices if you found them any lower, and she found the new Danielle Steele at the Sam's Club for \$9.82 with tax. Blake told her it had to be another bookstore, that was store policy, and she said, "Not nowhere I read it."

"Hold, please." He connected her to Peggy's extension without buzzing first. The line holding was a woman asking is this the Bookstar in Cordova? and when Blake said no she hung up on him.

He turned and took a stack of books from Thinnacus where he was trying to work

them into a bag with one hand. Blake noticed that the dress shirts Thinnaeus wore had the top button undone behind his tie, and the one beneath that was straining, threatening to pull apart.

“Thank ya, thank ya, Blake.” He liked Thinnaeus. Thinnaeus was the only other employee at the Bookstar on Winchester who Blake liked at all. When they had both started work at Bookstar in late January, Thinnaeus had talked to Blake like he mattered, regardless of what the title was on Blake’s plastic nametag, regardless that Blake was much younger than him and fresh from college. Thinnaeus always asked him for titles of good books to read.

Blake had always been good at thinking from books, thinking about them, though lately his simplest conclusions seemed mountainous and shaky—nothing solid enough to trust his weight to. But the different sections of the bookstore relieved him, gave him the sense that college had—the world continually opening everywhere he looked. For eight hours of the day he was at least distracted by all the worlds books offered, all the imagined possibilities. He liked the physicality of the books too, the heft and feel as he handled them, lined them up and made them alphabetical. The work had a logic and simplicity, a progress, that steadied his hands. Maybe, he thought, the words on the page would again encourage, reveal the way to go with his forward days left in life.

But here it was already March. He took an exacto-blade from a cup under the register to cut into one of the new boxes of books the UPS man had stacked by the register nearest the front door. Thinnaeus was ringing the purchase of a girl with colorless hair and ruler-straight bangs who stared at her feet. Blake could see the book she slung on the counter was a paperback, the width of a brick, with the letters of the title puffing outward,

and a blooming armageddon-type explosion with people running in all directions from it with their mouths wide open. When Thinnaeus told her the price, the girl shoved her hand in a front pocket and threw a ball of dollars on the counter and let him peel them apart.

Blake clicked the blade open and sliced into the clear tape across the first boxtop and lifted the flaps. Already March. He had graduated from the University of Tennessee that December. Majors in three humanities and he still had no idea what to do with any. Months before graduation he'd stood on the stone bridge stretching over Cumberland Avenue, the landmark between Knoxville and the University, and he watched the sun set in a bleeding slash of purple underlined by orange. The thought was singular, clear then, for some reason: he'd never made one real decision. His life had been charted on the state map with a fat red line marking its course, unmistakable from Memphis onwards, upwards. His parents had even paved the roads smooth for him at the university with their own successes two decades ago, and with alumni support since. Blake had only to submit his application and the folks at the Alumni House congratulated him and offered scholarships.

He marked that day on the bridge as a monument—it was as if some grand transformer had flung and swallowed the whole of his easy life in a darkness—as if he had misread the entirety of it to that point and now understood it with a shock, but had no idea what to do with such information. And everything felt to him, felt in him, blackened after that. Blake would drag the sofa onto his leaning front porch on Clinch Avenue and stare into the trees skirting the vacant lot across the street and think about an uncertain future too close. *Screwed if I don't get this figured out right.* It didn't start so harsh or serious, but as Blake tried to assign proper perspective, it grew and shadowed all. In the months before graduation he shed sleep and twenty pounds and most desires for what formerly pleased. As

the days grayed toward winter, his mind became muddled by even simple things, turned back and chewed over phantom prospects and invisible outcomes and the single, hungry question, What to do?—at first with the future, and then just with days, and finally, the next few hours. Even after his return home to Memphis and a medical diagnosis, the question was still growling to be fed something satisfactory.

Blake carefully sliced the shrink-wrapped plastic where it hugged the books together in the box, inhaled the welcome smell of paper and binding glue, emptied the Styrofoam peanuts to discover what new books had come.

“My man Blake. Read anything good lately?” Thinnaeus smiled and adjusted his tiny round glasses with a huge thumb and index finger. He’d told Blake they were to make him look as smart as he hoped to be.

Blake gathered a stack of Clancy novels and moved them onto the floor. He stood and leaned his elbow on the counter. “Let’s see. What’d I throw at you last week? Sophocles? I’ve been reading some Peter Taylor lately. Modern stuff. You ought to check him out.”

“Taylor. Okay. You the man.” Thinnaeus picked a frayed notepad from his front shirt pocket. He wrote with care, the pen hidden in his immense grip. “You spend all that time at college reading?”

“No, I managed to have a pretty good time. Just couldn’t narrow it down to one major, so I had to keep up with three.”

Thinnaeus laughed, a full bellow moving his broad shoulders. “Well, you did all the work and here I am sharing the wealth. I appreciate you being so generous, professor.” Blake laughed a little. To use that knowledge for *anything* right now gave him a mild

happiness.

Thinnaeus had a wife and three kids, and he'd flipped open a flat wallet with pictures encased in grimy plastic sleeves when Blake had first asked about them. He worked at the main hub at FedEx five nights a week, slinging boxes, then the mid-day shift at Bookstar because he thought people would be around who could help him pick good things to read since he'd never worried about that in high school, and the time for college had passed him years ago, he'd said.

"Oh, there's someone else I'm reading right now you'd probably like," Blake said. As he lifted his elbow from the counter, he caught Armbrust peeking around the edge of the shelves labeled Art/Architecture/Interior Design.

She came around the corner, tugging at the bottom edges of her red manager's vest, adjusting as if she'd just been goosed behind the stacks. The clipboard was clutched fiercely at her side. "One bookseller behind the cashwrap, one working the floor, unless backup is needed." She held one finger aloft before her and followed it to them and pointed. "Blake, you're on the floor now?"

"Yes."

"A *supervisor* has to manage her or his own time *and* that of the staff," she said.

Blake decided a large gold star would look good on her forehead, one big enough to cover her whole face. "Sure," he answered.

"Fine then, good." Armbrust looked to Thinnaeus and smiled tentatively.

"Thinnaeus, will you please scan that new inventory while there aren't any customers?" She pointed at the stack of Clancys.

"Be happy to, Peggy." Thinnaeus cradled the stack under one arm and swiped the

back of the top book with the metal wand until it beeped. “We’ll talk later, Blake.”

Blake pulled a dustcloth from his pocket and went to dust the Bestseller wall. The neon sign above the rows of outward-facing books buzzed faintly, announced “30% Off Bestsellers! Everyday!” Blake didn’t mind working the floor, but he had to assign tasks sure to keep his mind from its recent unruly thinking. He would count the books on the Bestseller wall to guarantee each had eight copies apiece, go to reference and alphabetize the dictionaries—one week alphabetically according to publisher, another week by size so that they descended prettily as a staircase along the length of the shelf. Afternoons were usually the dead times he retreated to the stacks for manufactured labor.

Thinnaeus had noticed the ritual; Blake was sure it was the reason he had begun to call him over the recessed ceiling speakers, summons to the front where Thinnaeus divided up the new stock under pretense of needing help, because Blake “knew where they went better.” He also guessed Thinnaeus might know something was wrong, but not quite sure what and hadn’t asked, and Blake thought it kind that Thinnaeus allowed him to remain silent, offering his own history to pass the time and redeem the silence from the cold and random beeps of the computer’s scanners.

He had told Blake of the Gulf War, when his division provided armored escort for the troops marching the “driveway to Hell,” he’d called it, the road leading into Baghdad when the U.S. took the city. He’d been in the Marines for fifteen years, joining up right out of high school, but no combat until then. He told Blake the week they were both hired that the world had other, better things to see, so he quit when his commission came up for renewal. “It’s just now gettin where I’m able to forget the smell of gunpowder and burnin oil,” he’d said. “Just now.”

Under his arm in a suitcase with his civilian clothes, Thinnaeus had carried back souvenirs from Iraq—charred children’s shoes, some burnt and sand-filled toys. “We’d be marchin recon, day on day, seemed like, and the closer we got to the city, I’d see little people’s things, broken all to pieces.” One of the advantages of working at FedEx, he’d told Blake, was that he could send some of these things to the Pentagon at employee discount. He’d type a simple note with each, reading, “To whatever powers be: I was a soldier of the U.S. I found this in Iraq, where the only sites we destroyed were military? Please keep them to remember. No response necessary. T.J., Main Hub.”

“I don’t want to forget that, and I don’t think they should. We was there, and we did it. I couldn’t think of nothing but my own kids,” he’d said. “I’m sure some of them got kids too. They owe remembering, at least.”

Blake thought forgetting the rest must be harder than remembering that one part, isolating and holding it dear. Thinnaeus said sometimes in the summer, when he’d get off the night shift at FedEx just after dawn, the sun would already be sitting full and round at the end of the flat acres of runway. “Looked just like that huge sun in Kuwait,” he’d said. “Seemed like that silver line of planes was endless, lifting above the sand, hovering on the heat just ‘till the afterburners kicked in. Looked like it threw them straight into that big round fire.” Thinnaeus said he did have to concentrate sometimes, to remember this was Memphis, his home, and not that far country of war.

Blake swiped his cloth halfheartedly across a shelf higher than his head. The bookstore had floor-to-ceiling windows, offering clear view of the wide sidewalks and slick parking lot pavement and four congested lanes of Winchester beyond. The sun was lowered in a purple and orange stripe behind the shining aluminum beams, the half-finished framing

of Target, soon to be the anchor of this strip mall, sure to bring Bookstar more business. He knew anyone pulling into the parking lot would be forced to conclude things were looking up all around.

*

The next day, Blake was on his own. Peggy had left a sheet with several tasks and small boxes where he could check them off. At the bottom she had written in hurried scrawl, interspersed upper- and lower-case: "Had to sit in for Dolores at REGIONAL MANAGERS' MEETING in Nashville. COMPLETE LIST and check off, will recommend you as SUPERVISOR, if all goes well. ***ALSO, publisher's rep is coming for me to look at his Fall front-list titles. Too late to cancel. Mark enough on his order sheet to make him happy, go with what he pushes. I'LL CORRECT IT when I get back. P. Armbrust." The note sat propped in front of the computer terminal he logged on with his employee number in the mornings, affixed to a clipboard smaller than the one Peggy was never without.

The publisher's rep showed up in the afternoon, a man in his early forties, clean shaven and smelling of an aftershave that made Blake think of women.

"And where did you say Miss Armbrust was today?" The rep surveyed the store as he asked, picking up a book from a front table and looking at the price on its back while Blake answered.

"She had to attend a regional managers' meeting. She told me we could go over the front-list today, and she'll call you day after tomorrow."

“Of course we can,” the rep said, flashing two rows of polished teeth. “Shall we?” He held his arm out toward the back of the store, as if Blake were visiting.

“Sure. Just a minute.” Blake left him standing in the Children’s section and walked toward the front. “Thinnacus, will you be okay up here while we’re in the back?”

“Be fine, Blake,” Thinnacus said with a wave, as he removed a life-sized cardboard cutout of Anthony Robbins from the front window display.

In the office, the rep fanned out glossy catalogs across Peggy’s desk. There was a large, felt-tipped red X by the titles on each cover. “These are the ones you’ll want to have plenty of. We’ve released a bunch of reader’s copies of all these in the City. Marketing says people are going nuts over them. This one will be huge.” The rep pointed to the face of an author Blake knew from the Bestseller wall. He’d never read any of his books.

The rep led him through the fat and shiny catalogs and marked up his lined order sheet without Blake making one addition or subtraction. He made a final emphatic scribble with a gold-tipped fountain pen fat as a cigar. “There, that should do nicely,” the rep said to himself. He spun the top back down on his plump pen and clipped it on his pinstriped shirt, careful to break the thick starch only at the corner of the pocket.

“Just need you to sign here.” The rep smiled at the line where his finger tapped.

Blake pulled open the top drawer of Peggy’s desk to find a pen. “Do you have any of your standard catalogs, not such new stuff?”

The rep smiled, like an eight year old boy might have just asked him about sex. “Why, of course, I keep them with me. But there’s not much action from the backlist. Peggy knows that. Those orders hardly ever change.”

“Can I see a couple?” Blake asked.

“Well, sure you can.” The rep smiled again, not as wide, and dug in the bottom of his brushed leather briefcase. His hand emerged with four catalogs never opened. He checked the time on his watch. “Look those over for a few minutes. I’m going to call New York.” The rep swept from the office, his exit perfumed.

Blake looked at the first catalog, heavy with classics, and placed the rep’s marked sheet beside it. In about five minutes, Blake figured he had ordered almost as much from the four as the rep had marked from the new ones. He signed his name at the bottom and wrote the date. Blake *was* here, he thought.

The rep came back, saw what Blake had done, and said, “Well, I’m sure Peggy can change it as she sees fit.” He smiled. “But it looks like you know your stuff.” The rep stopped talking as if he saw a vision on the wall above Blake’s head. “Say, I’ve got something in my trunk the marketing guys want me to try out here in the stores. Be back in a flash.”

When the rep returned, he had what looked to Blake like a leather computer case, held out before him, sacred. The rep slid his packs of things to the edge of the desk, put the case in the center, and rotated it to where the zippered side faced Blake. He came around and stood beside Blake and unzipped the case.

It was about the size of a laptop computer, shiny black, but it had a screen on top and fewer buttons than a computer keyboard, more like a large calculator.

The rep took three CDs from the case. He pushed an orange button on the face of the flat black rectangle and three slots on the top and both sides opened up. “Our publishing house has been working with the top faculty from Harvard, Princeton . . . all the Ivys and the other biggies. They’ve put together the best stuff from psychology, lit, history,

and this baby is going to be fully interactive. Cheap blueblood education. The kicker is they've made this thing with a *personal* mode, and that's how we'll sell it. The tech guys have pulled together all this information, where this interface will ask you questions, and then access all of it. It gives you a personal assessment based on your answers—what you'll be good at doing, even projected income based on your responses, adjusted for inflation! This is going to blow a big hole in the Self Help section.” He patted Blake on the shoulder. “Why don't you give it a spin?”

The rep hit the same orange button and the thing began to make a soft whirring noise. “I'll leave it to you. It only takes about twenty minutes,” he said, and asked if there was a coke machine somewhere.

Blake knew the machine couldn't do what the rep guaranteed, but his fingers drummed at the edges as it started and he heard the discs whine. He felt that same mild thrill as when he cut into the tape on a new box of books.

The screen listed questions, one at a time, and when he answered, another single question would appear. As they continued, the possible multiple choice answers became fewer. Too rigid and too general, Blake thought. It needed a place to elaborate or explain. Blake became more frustrated as the questions narrowed, and when the screen went blank and then projected “Personal Assessment Results” in the center, fading to black again, the only words after were “Input/Operator Error—Inconclusive.”

Blake thought it would make a nice banner to hang above his head. He was angry with himself for sharing hope with the black plastic box. Blake thumped his knuckles on the desk's edge and saw the tanned face of the rep in the doorway.

“Well, what did it say?” The rep's teeth were stacked perfectly in his mouth.

“I must not have done this right,” Blake answered. The rep tried to talk him into the two of them going through it together, but he declined as politely as he could and offered to help the rep take his things to his car. When he came back through the front door, rubbing his hands open-palmed on the front of his pants and frowning, Thinnaeus said, “Blake, something wrong?”

“It’s nothing, no big deal.”

Thinnaeus smiled at him and said, “Why don’t you follow me home for dinner. My Neesha is cookin tonight, and you look like you could use something good.”

“Okay, yeah. Thanks, Thinnaeus,” Blake said, and moved to open another of the waiting cardboard boxes, to give proper order to the books and then to find the place for each on the right shelf.

*

As he followed Thinnaeus’s blue Sentra down Winchester, Blake fumbled in his shirt pocket for one of the pills he’d been prescribed. It seemed a good time to take one. “Give it two or three weeks to kick in. You’ll start to feel better,” Robestein had said. So far it had made his tongue swell and dry out and gave his hands the shakes of the aged. A pill to make him be happy again. Blake only noticed that medication gave this constant thinking, depression if that’s what it was, a harder edge. He was *Clinical*. It sounded secretly dangerous.

Blake sped up to keep a semi labeled “Wal-Mart” from pulling between Thinnaeus and him. When he passed and the truck moved in behind, Blake could see in his rear-view the driver jabbing his middle finger out the window with enthusiasm. Blake waved.

His mother had hugged him tight when the family came for graduation in Knoxville, but she'd given a scared peep and squeezed his hand too. Blake knew it was the weight he'd lost and the confusion in his words when he'd called home lately. He'd tried to act normal at graduation to put his parents at ease, but it made things worse. Blake sat across from his parents in the suite at the Hyatt, the stocked bar to his back and the skyline of the city framed behind them where they sat and held hands. He spoke to them as if being interviewed for the position of first son, minding where he set his drink and covering the bare skin showing above his sock with a careful tug of his slacks when he crossed his legs. He kicked his foot and spoke quickly about his classes and his good grades. His mother said, "You know how proud we are of you, don't you, Blake?" like she was pleading with him, and then tears edged her eyes and she said her allergy medicine was making her do that.

When he moved back home, his boxes of things from high school were stacked neatly in the same spot where he'd put them in the garage, and now he was back to assign a new area for the college things stuffed in his handed-down Buick. "You can have your old room again, your old room upstairs!" his mother said to him, happy. Blake moved into the basement. At least then, he figured, I'll know that four and a half years have passed.

After he stacked his life in boxes in the garage, his parents made an appointment for him with Dr. Robestein, a psychiatrist friend of his father's from Kiwanis who drove a Porsche. Blake knew he had the right office complex when he saw the swollen cherry-red shape in the parking lot, PSYCHJOB on the vanity plate. He opened the heavy walnut door by its brass pull and saw a woman with her eyes on the floor hurrying out an identical door without an outside handle.

Robestein asked Blake questions about his appetite, his feelings about things ranked

on levels from one to ten, and where did he see himself being in one year, five years, ten years? Had he ever had thoughts of hurting himself? Blake gave terse responses and Robestein would “hmpfh” at intervals and finally announced, “You are depressed. Clinical depression. Completely treatable,” speaking the news with satisfaction to his clipboard where he checked things off. “Maybe a hint of obsessive/compulsive.”

His parents always told him we support you whatever you want to do, we just want you to be happy, and they said it more regularly since he’d moved home, another prescription for him to take. Happiness was a huge responsibility. Whatever you want to do.

Blake jerked the steering wheel to the left to dodge a plastic wheelcover launched from Thinnaeus’s right rear tire as he turned north onto Kirby. Questions mounted in his mind, questions which seemed relevant and should have been asked before now. Where did Thinnaeus live? Was he just trying to be polite by inviting him over? Maybe it was to pay him back for recommending all those books. He didn’t have to.

Blake could see holes in the red taillights showing white when Thinnaeus would hit his brakes, the edge of the plastic bumper stained black where grey smoke spit from the exhaust. They made a left turn onto American Way, passed a cinder-blocked Cash-For-Title Loans building with no windows, then a used car lot reflecting sun in windshields with prices of only hundreds marked in white shoe polish. Blake counted three billboards within a mile stretch that read, “Been injured in an accident? Call 1-888-LAW-YUR\$.” After another mile Blake realized he was being led through parts of Memphis foreign to him. They took Lamar far west where it became Crump, and Blake knew it to be west only because he could now make out the lights of downtown dressing the horizon. The steering wheel skipped in

his hand where the tires dove into potholes every few feet.

Thinnaeus turned left on Mississippi, heading south past the shells of projects hedged by chain-link fence crowned with barbed wire, plywood signs—*Hope Renovation, Phase VI*—cemented in the dirt. Thinnaeus pulled the Sentra to the curb after another quarter mile, and it backfired when he lurched it into park.

Blake got out of his much newer car, a graduation present, and wished he hadn't asked, "Will it be okay here?" right after he said it.

Thinnaeus smiled like he hadn't heard, and Blake wanted to thank him. Blake looked to the corner at the end of the street and saw a group of black men standing, overflowing onto the street. Others crossed the street back and forth, ignoring traffic. Thinnaeus saw where Blake watched and explained, "It's a pool-hall down there. It'll get louder later on." Low booming came up behind them as they stepped to a sidewalk swirling with trash. A lowered Cutlass with brilliant silver rims, dappled paint-and-primer, and black tinted windows rolled over the uneven pavement, bass thumping so loud the trunk shivered.

Thinnaeus led him up the steps to the porch of a small white house planted only ten feet from the street. The whole foundation and the top following seemed to lean slightly to the left. Paint flaked off the clapboard where the mailbox had been nailed to it more than once. A ring of keys jingled from Thinnaeus's left hand, but he knocked anyway. "I don't want to scare whoever's home," he said.

"Hey, baby, that you?" A slender woman, no more than five-two, came straight from the back of the house, rubbing her hands on her apron.

"Yeah, baby. I got a dinner guest. Neesha, this is Blake. We work together at the bookstore."

Neesha smiled behind the hatchwork of screen—even nicer than Thinnaeus, Blake thought—and said, “Nice to have you, Blake.”

Neesha pushed open the groaning door, hugged her husband. “Thinney, why don’t you help me finish up dinner. Blake, please make yourself at home. Something to drink?”

“No, but thanks,” he said. They retreated to the kitchen, holding hands, and Blake sat in a faded wingchair and drummed his fingers on the tops of his knees. He looked around and saw an old TV cabinet with framed pictures littering the top, so many it looked like they would spill over the edges. Most were of Thinnaeus and Neesha and twin girls. The rest must have been in-laws, grandparents.

Blake sat again and looked at the framed pictures above the sofa. The frames were organized in a sort of rough triangle; each held a portrait, very colorful and highly stylized. The one at bottom left was a portrait of Malcolm X, an image Blake had seen before, where he bit his lower lip and held a right fist aloft. The one beside it was of Martin Luther King, Jr., his face lowered, eyes sad and liquid. In the center portrait above both, the figure resembled Jesus with his arms outstretched in welcome, “Come to Me, All Ye Who Are Heavy Laden, and I Will Give You Rest” on a yellow banner beneath his sandaled feet, but with blackened skin. The banner wound about his ankles and surged as if upheld by a strong wind.

Blake found the bathroom down the hallway, very small and stuffed with things that suggested more than one woman used it. The room across the hall was a bedroom, spartan, with a double bed and green shag carpet on the floor. In the corner was a single chair with a FedEx uniform draped across. Blake thought it strange the room was so bare. No books, no television. Slender nightstands flanked the bed and a single picture stood on each. One

was of a young man who looked like Thinnaeus, angry. The other was of Thinnaeus and Neesha, Thinnaeus in full military dress.

Thinnaeus's voice called, "Hey, Blake. Dinner's ready!"

"Okay." He felt like a spy all of a sudden, and hurried from the doorway.

In the tiny kitchen, Thinnaeus pulled a chair out for Blake and said, "Too bad you can't meet my girls, they're spending the night at a friend's house. Double sweet what I'm sayin."

"We've got twins," Neesha said. "Both of em daddy's girls." Thinnaeus laughed.

"I saw their pictures, they're beautiful." Blake smiled. "This looks great."

Thinnaeus blessed the food, and they sat at the small table in chairs with broken vinyl and passed around bowls heaped with mashed potatoes, pulled pork, and fresh corn. Hot cornbread and what looked like onion pie. Blake couldn't find room to set things down. The meal reminded Blake of something, as if for the first time in a long while knowing that food had taste to it. Blake loaded his plate with seconds without being asked.

After dinner, the three of them leaned back in the rusting chairs and ate steaming apple pie with homemade crust; ice cream skidding slick off the glazed top where Thinnaeus plopped it down. Conversation seemed to swarm about Blake's head in the small kitchen and Thinnaeus unbuttoned the top button behind his tie, letting the thick neck out. They asked Blake about his family, brothers and sisters—he told them one of each, I'm the oldest—and they told him his family sounded nice. They were.

Blake pushed back to cross his legs comfortably and looked at Thinnaeus. "By the way, I noticed a picture in your bedroom. Is that you when you were younger?"

Thinnaeus's smile faded and Neesha's followed. He was quiet for a second, and when he spoke, it was quiet. "No, Blake. That was my boy. He died about three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be prying. I'm sorry." Blake wanted to leave. He brought the front legs of the creaking chair back to the floor.

"It's okay. Really." Thinnaeus swallowed hard. "He was mixed up in something pretty bad. But he was my boy." He closed his eyes and made them tight. "Some things you just never going to have answers for."

Blake apologized again, and though Thinnaeus said it was okay and he knew it to be, there wasn't much conversation left. He asked to use the bathroom, and when he stood, he looked at his watch and said he should probably go after that. Neesha smiled and touched his hand and began to gather dishes.

Blake passed the bedroom again and it was bleeding into dark inside the doorway. Stains on the floor caught his eye and drew him to enter the dusk. They were bare spots in the shag at the foot of the bed. He lined both of his feet up in them—the shape was all wrong—patted one with his foot, and looked again at the angry picture of Thinnaeus's son, hard to see in the near dark. Blake bent half over in an effort to make out the features in the picture and saw the worn patches of carpet were more obvious. He knelt down and tried one knee, and then the other, facing the bed, and they fit the shape, even if the larger outline around his own knees made his seem more those of a child. The two pictures on the nightstand were in his clear view.

He closed his eyes there and saw only blackness like a screen, but after a time remembered the darkened shape with the banner beneath his feet. The yellow of it blazed

like gold afire and entwined the dark ankles, and though the cloth looped in wide and reckless curls as if it might break loose in all possible directions at once, the letters written on the fabric were bold and clear and protruded where the single promise stood.

Blake couldn't tell how long he knelt there, only for moments, maybe longer. He felt real pain from where the carpet was gone when he tried to stand. When he got to his feet he rubbed his knees and turned to see Thinnaeus in the doorway, and felt calm enough to answer what he was doing.



The Fifth of July

On the day my grandmother was buried, my grandfather shucked corn. The thick sun of July had already begun its retreat; the drooping top-leaves no longer bathed in yellow, the hot circle now leveled down toward the horizon at the end of the field across the highway.

Papaw made his way steadily through the narrow rows, the long stalks whispering as he pulled clear the fresh ears. "Another nub'n," he would utter at intervals, casting away those abnormally small or underdeveloped. Even though his vision had declined over the past five years where he could not drive or see to read, the field was Braille to him, a home to his hands.

My father followed my grandfather immediately behind, single file, carrying two large white-plastic chemical buckets washed clean to hold this late harvest. Dad paused in the dirt, clenching the arced metal handles tight, then setting them to the earth with a full thud. A red-winged blackbird shot from the last row and pumped his wings, red there, then gone, toward a blackened line of trees along the field's lower edge. Dad put a forefinger and thumb to the bridge of his nose and passed a strained sigh through his teeth. He stood very still and swiveled his head, white now at the temples, and watched the tops of the corn with a suspicious narrowing of his eyes. Following his father and performing this work of the field, the work he'd grown doing, did not seem to sit well with him, not today.

My grandfather noticed none of this. Feeling up the last stalk on the final row, his weathered hand hesitated, fondled the green upright as if to make his footing stable, then hooked its thumb onto the right pocket of his trouser. The other four fingers rubbed the

pant leg, tapped lightly on the fabric, and then my grandfather looked down at his hand. He still wore his best dark gray suit pants from the funeral.

“We’d better get to shuckin’ Paul. Sun will be down not too long.”

“Coming Dad.” My father looked tired as he picked up the heavy-growing corn buckets at his sides. A cloud passed high overhead and he studied it, waiting for some answer, as if continuing to do what my grandfather asked might be conspiracy in a violent act.

I did not know a place to take in this, had not known any right space to occupy myself with that whole day, so I sat under the carport in a lawn chair and watched them, and stayed quiet.

Dad shushed through the stalks and followed Papaw back toward the house. I turned in the chair as they came, and saw the figures of my two great-aunts, lighter shadows on the dark black-topped drive running up from the highway. Their houses stood down to the east of the field, one next to the other where my grandfather had built them. Montine, Papaw’s older sister who never married, lived in the closer of the two. She had taught school for forty years but gave her time over to a garden now, and sealing things tight in jars and stacking them with dates in masking tape in palsied magic marker. Gertrude was younger than both of them, had a family of her own, but looked older than Montine from a humped back, grown by helping Uncle Louis pick decades of cotton. I saw she had a plastic E.W. James grocery bag on her arm with snap-beans jutting from the edges.

“Well, Nathe, we saw you and Paul pickin’ up here, and ‘Tine and me thought we’d come on up,” Aunt Gertrude said.

“Okay.” Papaw took a clod of keys from his pocket and found one by fingering

across the top of them; he unlocked the office door at the back of the carport and took down two yellowed Tupperware bowls from a high shelf and handed one to Auntie, one to Gertrude.

“Dad,” my father said, “don’t you think this can wait? It’s late.” He set the two buckets on the smooth concrete and loosened his tie.

“Naw. I need to get these shucked and put up.”

Dad held his palms open and gestured at the buckets. “Dad, these are all fresh. They’re not going to spoil sitting here tonight.”

“I’m gonna put these up, then I’ll come in.” It was no explanation—only a statement of what would happen. My grandfather pulled three lawn chairs into a half circle facing the highway, and then another for himself, next to me. He reached into the open office door again and took two brushes from a hook on the wall. Then he dragged the two buckets to the center of the semicircle, hung a brush from the side of each and handed an ear of corn to me, offered one up to my father. Dad rubbed his thumb over the nails of his other four fingers and took the ear of corn; his face and eyes rounded and softened a bit as he stood before his own father, and he looked to me then more like the grainy pictures of his childhood.

“Yes. Me and Tine saw y’all up here, and I’ve got more beans down there growing ‘till I don’t know what to do with them,” Aunt Gertrude repeated, starting things fresh. “So we thought we’d come up here and sit and get it done. Yes we did.” She chuckled.

We started working into a long, delicate silence. A breeze trembled through the corn and rustled swirls of dust across the concrete of the carport in faint, tiny tornadoes. The sunset had spread flat and wide in a stripe of heated lavender above the treeline at the dark

end of Miller's field stretching off from the other side of the highway. I could hear the beans at intervals swirling down the sides of the Tupperware. The evenness of the sound, the routine of our gathered movements offered a real comfort to me in a day that stuck out like a bone breaking skin. I was glad to be doing anything.

All faces tended to the work in their hands, but my father's was regaining its angularity and becoming again more uncertain. Papaw fumbled for an ear at the edge of the bucket, where the corn's shape had become more gray and fluid to his failed sight in the painted dusk.

"Nathan, you ought to hang that brush on your chair where you can feel for it," Auntie said.

My grandfather erupted. "Tine, don't tell me my business up here! I'us reaching for some more corn."

"Alright. Well, I didn't know." Auntie's voice was always faint and flat, fainter than usual then.

Aunt Gertrude looked at me and gave another quick, raspy chuckle, a means she used to make all her moments less severe.

"No, you didn't know," Papaw said. The two aged women sat close together in the aluminum chairs, facing my grandfather over the corn bucket, and in that moment he was just a boy taking issue, stamping out his own space between older and younger girls his parents had put there.

I needed to reach across the bucket for the brush, over my grandfather's knee, but I was hesitant to move it, afraid he might have need of it and afraid to see his fingers fumble when they could not find it there. I had an ear in my hand, clean of its green shuck, and I

tried to brush the silks off with my palm and then to pinch them out one at a time with my fingers. They were fine as hair, and soft and so many, but they clung with strength, imperceptible at their roots among the tight, creamy colored kernels. I realized then that I was looking at my father as if I expected him to tell me what to do.

But he was staring at my grandfather. Papaw's lips pattered motorlike now, a syncopated sound like the John Deeres he drove, and his hands moved in rhythmic, trained strokes stripping away the rough browned-green shells. He seemed to be looking through the bucket, past us, at something even beyond the far end of Miller's field.

Dad's face sharpened and he stood and said, "I think I'll let you all finish up." The corn he held was unshucked; when he let it drop it tottered on the edge of the bucket and fell to the concrete with a fat, fleshy skidding. His hand had shot forth in the same moment to try to keep it safe and when it hit he hurried to snatch it from the ground, as if the surface held some invisible and fatal stain. Dad cupped the green sheath and fed it slowly into the white mouth of the bucket this time, and said, "I'm sorry. Sorry about that," to no one.

He turned and walked away and reached at a bulge in his back pocket as he moved toward the far corner of the house, away from the garden and carport. In the shadows of early evening, his form had regained the familiar shape of my father--a little stooped but strong--while he paced back and forth, I guess trying to get a clear signal to call my mother, back at home in Memphis.

I sat next to my grandfather and handed him an ear each time he finished cleaning the one in his hands. The fragile rhythm returned then for a few minutes, beans spilling rapidly from my great aunts' fingers, sliding with gentle taps down the identical bowls held securely between skirted knees, and the hush of shucks stripped away in single pulls, stacked

now in a loose feathery mound almost a foot at the top.

When there were none left to hand him, I said, "Papaw, that's all."

"Oh-kay," he said, slow and quiet. He moved to clean up with the same determination, and Dad returned from the corner of the house and asked what he could do. He and I gathered up the spent shucks and cradled them to the back corner of the yard, to the square black-iron pen where trash was burned. He poured diesel from a rusted red gas can on the pile and handed me a match, and we stood a minute beside each other before the blue-green crawling flames and the one slender column of smoke. When we came back to the carport, I asked Aunt Gertrude if she wanted me to drive them to the foot of the hill, and she chuckled and handed me the empty plastic bag and said, "We'll see you boys tomorrow." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dad with his hand cupping Papaw's elbow so that he wouldn't stumble when he climbed the steps into what was now his house alone. As his foot sought the first brick step, I could see my grandfather's shiny dress wingtip clumped with dirt at its heel.

My grandparents' home is a ranch style, a rectangular box sitting at the swell of a bare hill, appearing a small dash in the middle of a great green circle from above, I've imagined. I can stand before the sink in the kitchen and look out through the carport to where the long, sloping driveway fades into the highway. In the opposite wall, there is an identical window with the stove sitting beneath it, where I can look out back and see the yard and barn and acres of lolling crops. That night, I noticed that if I stood at the corner of that window, I could make out the silhouette of the corn off to the right under a full, blazing moon. I could see by the fierce light that several of the stalks' tops were shorn off, jagged

against the blue-dark sky.

After helping my grandfather to bed, my father came wandering into the kitchen in boxers and a T-shirt. He reached under the cabinet and pulled out a chipped green mug with a gold duck in flight on the side and filled it with water.

I crimped tinfoil around the edges of an aluminum casserole pan still half full of the finger sandwiches my grandparents' Sunday-school teacher had dropped by that morning. My father and I hadn't really talked that day, except for his practical words about me giving Mom a ride to the church because he had to be there earlier, or mine when I told him I thought what he had written on the yellow notepad for me to say (on his behalf) about Mamaw during "Family Remarks" sounded just fine.

I wanted to tell him now how fine it was, how sorry I was for him—at the least ask how he was doing. All the words I thought of seemed too slight. I wasn't sure what I really meant, anyway. I opened the fridge while he sipped the water and gazed out the back window.

"Dad," I said, "what happens if you don't pick corn? Will it spoil?" I had in mind the broken tops, thinking maybe the stalks would give under the stress of the corn's weight and surrender the overripe ears to rot into the ground.

He didn't respond. I looked away, back into the fridge, balancing the casserole pan on my left forearm while trying to make some room for it. A Wal-Mart-sized jar of maraschino cherries, my grandmother's favorite, had been moved behind the thin railing on the door's inside, beneath the tinted butter compartment and white plastic dimples that held the eggs. The shelves in the fridge were stacked with dishes and pots friends had cooked for our family, delivered along with heating instructions and their brief condolences.

“Dad?” I said again, thinking he hadn’t heard my question. He walked from the window to the open fridge and stood behind me to look inside. He saw the cherries on the door, took the jar carefully in his hand, and moved it back to the center of the top shelf, pushing hard enough to bend two aluminum pans to make a space for it there.

My father’s answer was punctuated with a heavy sigh, as all his words had been that late afternoon. “No, corn won’t spoil,” he breathed. “Hard. It’ll just get very hard.” Then he took another sip of water and shuffled back through the darkened hall to finally lie down and rest.

The Righting of Benjamin Hallow

I still see my mother every other week or so when Memphis is where she makes her connection. We'll go to the airline lounge or to some of the newer restaurants on the concourse—even the Starbucks if she's in a hurry. She still owns the house, but I don't know of her spending the night in town for over ten years now.

She came through last Tuesday, on the red-eye flight from somewhere, so I got dressed for my shift before I went to meet her. Our conversations and our time have developed a familiar routine. She'll take my arm as she exits the plane, make small talk to be assured I am okay and that she appears as who I remember her to be. She was a little shocked this time, I think, when she came dragging her wheeled suitcase through the door at gate 15—she didn't expect to see me in my work uniform. (I usually go home and change before I come to meet her.) But she recovered; she let go of the suitcase handle, held her hands out, and a big smile broke across her face before she said, "Good morning, Ben!" cheerful as could be, and then hugged my neck hard and kissed my cheek.

"Morning, Mother," I said, and smiled back. Then the routine recovered, we talked for a while with ease and affection, and I always see in her expressions why my father stood alone at gates, humbled before pilots in his ground-crew uniform. Though my mother is older now, she has that good Nordic blood, fair skin, and at least the appearance of California, countenance bathed in well-wishing, chronic sunshine. My mother travels constantly now, seeking out the whispered promise of visited places.

I tried to fumble through my own proposal to her, there at the airport like my father had, but she wouldn't say yes to me. I said, "Mother, it's been years since Dad died. Surely you want to settle back down sometime." And I mentioned that Memphis was more home to her than anyplace, and I was here after all.

She looked at me with a brilliant half-smile and ran her fingernail along the metal edge of the booth table between us. And her smile faded. "Oh, Ben," she said, "I'll never stay here." She looked out the wide window to the grassy sway beyond the runway closest to us and I followed her gaze. A plane turned and the light of sunrise flashed off a wing as it did, so bright that we both squinted when we looked back at each other. For a moment I couldn't quite focus. Her eyes had a look I'd only seen a couple of times before when they found me again, one I can remember from childhood that she'd put on my father and I knew even then I wasn't meant to see. A look as honest as I've ever known, and then she smiled and laughed a little. She looked at my chest, where my name was stitched in blue cursive above the pocket of my uniform shirt. "They say California is all fruits and nuts, but this city is a deep kind of crazy, the way you can't joke about."

Her unusual directness made my face redden some. "Mother, it's not as bad as that," I said, laughing a little myself. "It's not like it was. You haven't been here for years." I swirled my coffee cup on the center of the formica between us.

She reached for my hand, held and squeezed it, and her eyes became opaque as she stilled my motion and looked hard at me. "Oh, Ben, you're dear to me. You know I love you. But this place breaks my heart." She took a thin rectangular napkin from the metal dispenser by the ketchup, dabbed her eyes, and threw the wadded paper toward a small wastebasket near our table as she said "heart." It missed. I got up from the booth and put it

in the can, took the handle of her suitcase with my bad hand and offered her the good one.

I don't think I'll ask her again.

I got to work about seven, and realized when we were heading out that Smiley forgot to close the gate on the back of the truck. It's still cool enough then that you don't smell the clingings of garbage that much, not nearly like when it gets hot by nine, but the door was making a racket as we moved out of the parking lot and I dropped the front tire over the curb, too far to the right.

"You mind getting out and closing it up?" I asked.

Smiley dropped out of sight off the high vinyl bench seat, worn to lined shreds from butts sliding across countless times a day. I flipped the hazards on. I could hear the gate groan closed and slam a hollow bang, and then Smiley hoisted himself back into the cab by the faded silver pull on the A-pillar, showing me a grin of scattered teeth, hissing happily, "Same ol' shit, brand new day." His face is a sideways oval when he smiles, and splotched. His black fingers are stained orange at the ends from Chee-tos, which he seems to always have in his shirt pocket.

In fall and winter a cool mist hovers just off the pavement of Memphis and in summer there's a curtain of amber haze that looks thick enough to reach out and touch. I don't usually drive the truck, but on days that start out looking so new I like to be able to sit behind the wheel and see it unfold. So I asked Bull and all he said was, "You been here long enough. Drive. Walk. Don't make me no difference," working the end of a thumb-sized cigar stub like it would escape into his mouth if he stopped chewing.

Bull is the driver, but he has no illusions about the job and cares nothing for displays of his moderate power, so he'll say yes when I ask. It's a small and distinct pleasure,

gripping the far edges of the steering wheel big as a truck tire, spectating the bouncing view over the monstrous dash and picture window of grimy windshield. I like to hear the crew holler at me or slap the echoing sides to go ahead after they've made a pickup, and then to watch them fan out over streets and emerge from driveways with the green buckets. It lends a certain dignity.

But about ten or eleven, when day is underway, I see only the trash. Bins upon bins of garbage and it never changes, never lets up. The day is warmer then too, and the truck is heavier, full with smell, peeled off the cab after I mash on the gas and thrust the truck forward and leave the odor behind, even if only for moments, before I have to stop and let them pick up more.

The majority of days, for almost fifteen years now, I walk the route—carry my own weight so to speak. The stink is more intense when I'm doing the handling, but I can deal with it better in its midst. What I see when I fix the green buckets to the back, flip the lever and watch them shiver up and dump, is the trash of others, the things they want to be rid of. Most of it is far from interesting, but you have to be able to discriminate. There is commonness to all garbage—from the affluent of east Memphis, and midtown, to the poorer of the north and south city—plain trash all people use up and cast away. It's what the eye is trained to see through to that matters, underneath the blackened banana peels and smeared coffee grounds and caked food and papers.

There's an older man who lives off Summer Avenue, on Tuesday's route, in a modest brick house with black iron railings dressing the cement porch and scaling the carport. The place is neat but worn with years. Every week what he throws away will include no less than eight yellow-plastic gallon milk jugs (he seems to live alone), and nearly

twenty newspapers from across the country, all Wednesday editions. He's one who still eludes me.

On the way back to the station that afternoon, Blackburn yelled at me from behind the cab, "Hallow, pull it over!" I thought we'd dropped something, but I didn't see anything on the pavement in the big side mirror. I looked in the other and saw him rooting through heaps piled on the curb. Wasn't even part of our route. "Jackpot!" he shouted, spent fifteen minutes harnessing four dining room chairs to the sides of the truck with bungees, and climbed back on the running boards and said to me, "Amazing what some folk will throw out, ain't it?" I have to admit, when we got back to the station and he pulled them down, they were a good find, wooden, hardly any dings and made of a deep cherry. "Nice," I told him, but I was tired and ready to knock off. I pulled open the dingy metal and glass door leading to the locker room, went back there to my locker, put on a clean undershirt and wadded the ones I'd taken off into a ball under my arm, and walked home.

*

My father was a massive man, almost mythic in my sight by physical space he took up and the greater one left when he died. I had just turned eleven. He was not unknown to me; I have the facts that he walked across the Mississippi Bridge into Memphis from Arkansas with a pack on his shoulder and asked for a job of the first person down on the slanting cobblestones who would listen without humor to a boy of fourteen. His first task was to muscle and curse large drums of chemicals onto barges where they would be pushed away from the city, quiet and safe. The work was changeless and backbreaking, but he could not

retrace his steps. When I asked after the existence of my grandparents, he told me his story in one sentence flat as the ground: "It was a hot night, there was drinking and yelling and one of my parents shot the other and then themselves." He said that was all he knew.

So I don't know if it was heredity or the ceaseless work that grew him into the broad shoulders and trunked legs I clung to and looked up. He worked for seven years at the edge of the River and moved from handler, to driving the flatbeds, to the plywood dispatch office on stilts. His supervisor told him he should get degreed. "Don't get stuck down by this water rest of your life. You're smart enough."

My father simply did what the man said, likely thinking it another part of his job rather than means to break free, studying on his own for his GED and then for four years while manning the plywood tower in long stretches of dead night, directing the running lights of semis in and out of the lot, onto barges, out into the deep channel and away. He majored in Transportation and Logistics at Memphis State, drove from campus to the River, grew more and more familiar with organizing the movement of people and things.

The supervisor came to my father one morning and told him he had moved up as far as possible and that a job at the airport had been arranged, hoped he didn't mind that he took liberties. Dad moved into that job, then took one with the city, moving up until he became assistant director of Public Works in just enough time to be settled in for the Sanitation Strike of '68 and for King's assassination. So that's his story, and mine in part.

When my father met my mother, he was still working at Memphis International, doing the job his supervisor had told him to go do. My mother has told me the story several times since his passing, and it always gives me some pride to know I came from it. Dad's job there was to usher the silver planes into their slots and direct the unloading of luggage

and its passage to the next proper place. My mother was a stewardess, California girl, at port for hours in another city rendered distinct only by the particular ugliness of the airline lounge. All the passengers had exited, she was checking bins for things left behind and returning seats to upright positions when she saw him through the double insulation of plastic window, down on the bald runway pavement, moving suitcases and bags and boxes. "He was a huge, beautiful man," she said. Their eyes met, and it was only after years of marriage and then time alone that she had been able to dress that moment in how much it meant to her. "When your father looked at me, he just stood and took me in. There was a sense of, I know it sounds silly, direction, in his eyes, like he knew where he would be." (She told me he would say later that her look, then and always, lifted him up, and that he had to handle her gently, ever fearful she might again fly away. I never heard such words from my father, but I don't put it past him.)

He came up to the concourse—which he never did—and asked her if he could buy her a cup of coffee. She wrapped her fair hand around his grand forearm and allowed him to lead her to the kiosk and then down and out to the tarmac. It was early December. A tug was unhitched from its trailers, idling white blooms of exhaust, and he asked, "Would you like to go for a ride?"

"Oh, Ben," she told me, "I was so happy for those minutes. We drove slowly past all the gates, and it was the first time I'd seen people in an airport, from that distance. They were lined in the windows, gathered and waiting to be taken somewhere else, and looked like just so many . . . things, from that far away. Then he sped off down an abandoned runway, fast as could be! My eyes were streaming and I remember the blue runway lights were lit there and flashed at the edges, and we laughed and laughed and I realized I was still clinging

to his arm.”

My father ventured into the concourse regularly after that night to check arrival times, somehow knowing when she would touch ground on the way to somewhere else. Each time he would be waiting at the gate to ferry her off to another part of the airfield for the hours she was his. Tall grass with wildflowers where the runway left off, how you could just see the River from the control tower if you stood on tiptoes and it wasn't yet dusk—showing her that his airport was actually some *place*. Six weeks later on a flatbed luggage trailer draped in candlelight and white cloth, he asked if she'd make it hers with him. Come in and land.

I received Mother's California complexion if not so much that blood, blond hair and fair skin fitted over a frame almost as large as my father's. I'm tall and broad shouldered but not as vast as he, and though my appetite is as incurable as Mother says his was, I can't keep as much weight on me and many times have trouble just keeping my food down. I went to Memphis State too, like him, but I finished in a bare three years, and didn't have the inclination, or freedom, to leave town after that. I felt like there was something still to be finished rather than started.

The first day I presented myself for work, after my application passed over the heads of the union, sidestepping their need for approval because of who my father was, I stood in the locker room and buttoned the blue Sanitation Department uniform over one of the v-neck white T-shirts from the new pack I'd stacked in my locker—my way to start every day from then on, fresh. When I fastened the last button, closed the rusted door and tightened my belt, I turned to face a wall of men. A police line-up in reverse, me the one they had to give positive ID.

Even now, some twenty-odd years after King's assassination and the Sanitation Strike's resolution, I'm still one of the only white trash collectors to work for the City of Memphis. The faces of all the guys I now think of as friends just stared that first day. Smiley was grinning wide as ever but with what I'll call an edge of malice, remaining teeth gritted together as if a stone lodged between his jaws. Blackburn was the only one provoking, trying to see if active trouble could be made of it. He stepped from the line and came and stood before me, half an inch shorter, and said, "Boss man, what you here for? What? You gonna clean up? You just tryin to do right, ain't you? That it?" I didn't say anything.

Blackburn turned to the line of black faces, arms folded across their chests, and offered, "Do Right here's gonna help us pick up the trash. Big of him, ain't it?" and then walked past and out the metal door to the trembling diesels. The line started to break apart and drift out, eyes remaining on me as they exited as if I were ready to pull a knife or gun.

The first days and couple of months they'd enact small accidents, I guess to see how much I would take or if I could so be made to leave—dumping the garbage over my hands or down my side as if they'd slipped, "Sorry 'bout that, Do Right," or leaving me to wander a neighborhood looking for the truck and pushing a full garbage bucket for half an hour, "Do Right, where'd you go? We been wasting time looking for you." When they saw I wasn't going to lose control, wouldn't leave, it settled down into the routine of just the job, though the nickname stuck for almost a year until they relented to calling me Hallow, my last name.

Bull is the only one who has never acted any different. He stood at the end of that line of men, but leaned against a locker like he wasn't quite part of it, chewing the frayed end of soggy cigar and waiting for the others to be done with what they thought they had to do

he could get on with his day. (He had been in the Department since long before the strike—his is the only name I can remember my father mentioning. I was aware that first day they all knew who my dad was.) Bull waited for several of the men to file out and while a few still lingered, said to me, gruff, “Ben, you ride my truck. I got to train you. Now, if everybody’s done here, let’s go.” And he’s called me Ben all along.

*

I’ve read all the articles from the *Commercial Appeal* and *Press-Scimitar* about the Sanitation Strike and about King’s death, and most of the books too. I was only nine in 1968 and have come to know all the facts since. That the strike had been going on for a while, that King was upset the first march he’d been involved with in Memphis was the first to turn violent, that he was nervous and prophetic about being here the night before he was shot. Maybe it’s why I still hear outsiders (Nashvillians mostly) talk down about us, like Memphis itself pulled the trigger and still has something to hide.

All I knew then is what a nine year-old boy knows. I didn’t even know my Dad’s title was Assistant Director of Public Works for the City of Memphis, only vaguely understood that he had something to do with garbage being taken up and moved away. But I knew something was wrong, and it had somehow to do with his job, because anyone could smell the city beginning to stink. And summer coming soon with the angry heat to make it intolerable. I remember best where things happening outside came into contact and chafed against my small world for the first time. Like that Dad got to where he wouldn’t pitch a ball to me in the dying light on our strip of front yard after work, that Mother would begin

to screen me from him like some terminal patient when he would walk through the door—"Not now, Ben, your father's much too tired." That he'd sit in his deep brown recliner with tweed covers on each arm, head back, eyes closed. I would crumple in the hallway and bounce the ball off the baseboard; he never did ask me to stop, and I have loved him for that single thing every time I remember, as I desperately tried to be just annoying enough.

Dad never drank, never watched television, but during that time he would turn the TV on at ten, watch it with his elbows across his broad knees, tie still dangling from his neck, huge hands knitted together and kneading. I would escape bedtime, sneak out and sit in the dark triangle the hall doorframe provided and watch Dad where he couldn't see me, watch the gray-green light of the television bathe his face, the tint of the things it showed making all his features charcoaled and dense. At ten thirty he'd click the TV off and I would run back into my room and hush against the door and listen for his great feet to pass, and on the shag they sounded like he was dragging them.

In the time of the Strike, I recall just two times being allowed to actually see what the news showed to him, to sit at Dad's feet and view it for myself. We had an old black-and-white even though color had come along, and my memories of the larger world of the time are cast in those two sharp hues. There were sirens that first night, and I came from bed rubbing my eyes and saying I couldn't sleep. (I remember I had made a craft at school that day—hard soybeans shellacked to a board, in the shape of a shark—I wanted Dad to see it, and Mother had forgotten about it when he came home.) She shushed me where she sat next to my father's recliner in a stiff dining room chair, and Dad motioned me toward him and let me work myself between his feet. It was the night of the riots, after the strikers'

march turned bad. King had agreed to walk along with it, in the promise it would be peaceful. I saw black faces and bodies in suits and dresses like my parents wore on Sundays, gathered together in places and crying, some running away, others being kicked and beaten with thin clubs by white police in visored helmets and high black boots stretched to their knees. Several runners were draped by white boards with the bold, dark statement "I Am A Man," and the boards flapped against their legs as they ran, tripping some up. Many of the police caught up and sprayed the black faces so that they lowered to the ground and exploded in tears. I didn't care too much, because none of it seemed that real, my only concern the look on the faces of my parents as they watched. I remember how the streets looked black, the sidewalks white, people scrambling.

The other instance was much earlier than bedtime, but it was already dark. The phone rang and my father said "Hello," paused for a while and said, "Alright. Thanks." He clicked the TV on and collapsed his mighty weight into his chair and Mother came and stood behind him and eased the sides of his head with her open hands. I didn't care much then either, not for the black faces crying much harder this time, or for the repeated images of people standing and pointing from a second floor hedged by thin railing, King lying at their feet with blood circled around his head a darker black than anything else framed in the screen. But I do remember being deeply scared, a child's wild fear when he looks to his parents and has the sickening feeling that they're scared too and have no idea what's happening. And to that point, even that dark evening as I sat crosslegged and sucked the cuff of my pajama sleeve, I was still convinced my father held the whole of my world in his huge hands and could guard it safe and pure.

Memphis is the only place I've ever called home. Blacks form a circle around whites, in the north and south, moving into places as whites have progressively flown east from them. The city is roughly linear, running west to east with whites living around the main artery of Poplar Avenue, which carves through the center of the city and drops off into Highway 72 east past Collierville, a former farm-town. You'll hardly ever see a garbage truck using Poplar—it's much too busy, difficult to use while making a route. Besides, people don't like to be stopped in the hurry of their days to wait for the garbage to be collected. They want to keep moving. I think most of the businesses on Poplar have after-hours pick-up to reduce such commotion.

I myself live somewhere in the middle of the city. I have a one-bedroom condominium fronting on Poplar, right before it peaks the viaduct and leads into midtown and the deeper parts, where Walnut Grove passes under and becomes the less dignified Union, the fat avenue with streets leading north and south off it from there. My place is small and spare and clean—to the point of compulsion, an almost religious zeal for things to be sanitary and in order—and I can walk to the Scott Street Department from home. Scott Street is right beneath the viaduct, ground-level, below the overpass.

I walk to work most days, and I was walking to the station for a Thursday shift about five years ago. It was fall, crisp and air clouding with a breath, leaves rustling red and brown and orange, dropping to swirl and scratch across the pavement. It would be a good day for the work, I could already tell, the temperature a friend to keep the garbage cool. Air that made me enjoy the sheer working, to see progress made, the truck fill, but without odor to it.

Bull wore his thick tan corduroy jacket with holes at the elbows. He asked, "Ben, you want to drive this one? Got a new guy to train today," and spat on the pavement and

smearred it with his boot.

“No thanks. Unless you need me to, I’d just as soon ride it.” I grabbed the chilled metal handle and climbed on the flatworn footpad behind the rear tire, adjusted my grip once I was up. Bull said from beside me on the ground, “Fine by me. Meet Spence.”

I turned and looked at this big guy, about as tall as me but a little thicker in the shoulders and wrists of a girth that the blue uniform’s sleeves barely buttoned around them. I took a hand from the arced grip and held it out to him, said “Hi, nice to meet you.”

He looked to be about thirty, but didn’t have a strand of hair on his round black head or the baby-smooth chin. He didn’t take my hand right away, and I had to readjust my balance on the footpad as I hung from the truck. His large hands were still pulling the work gloves on, and they did so slowly, his blank face looking up at me as if I were something displayed behind glass that he couldn’t believe to be there.

“How do?” he said with a slight curve of his mouth, took my hand and shook it two chopping times, and dropped it and stared at me a moment longer. He walked to the front of the truck where Bull leaned against a bumper, and didn’t lower his voice at all when he said to him, “What the hell is this?”

“Nothin’ should bother you any,” Bull said back. “Get in and let’s go to work.” He opened the passenger door of the cab.

I knew before I turned to see the back of Spence’s shoulders and his left fist raised with a thumb pointing backwards that it would be aimed at me. It wasn’t something that I let bother me; there had been two other new guys in the time I had worked there who took a little time getting used to a white guy being on their crew. Best to do the work of the day and ignore him and let him get over it. Show him I was just there to do the same job.

The morning went fine. Every can seemed to be fuller than normal, each straining the muscles in my arms when I would wheel it to the truck and lift it into the metal collar. Beads of cold sweat ran down my back under the flannel jacket I wore against the chill November air. I passed Spence a few times on the way to and from the truck with another load, him with his gripped before him under the huge knuckles, and he'd look at me and laugh a cynical sort of laugh, almost a grunt, like I was a joke he didn't get, or one that disgusted him and wasn't funny. I let it go, said nothing, did the work.

In the afternoon we took the load out to the landfill at the east end of the city, verging on the suburbs. After we passed through the entry gate and started the slow incline up the hill, Bull grinded the transmission down into low and the truck began a high-pitched whine under all the weight, carving its way to the top. The double tires at the rear always seem unsure at the landfill, trying to grip and push upward on the soft road of packed trash. Spence was in front of me, hanging right behind the cab; I was still on the rear footpad, both of us swaying with the gentle rock of the truck up the mammoth pile.

As soon as we crested the top I could see other trucks were there emptying—#14, driven by Willie, Smythe's #42, Scotty in #26. I showed each a half-lifted hand in greeting as we passed. Spence saw and gave another mean laugh and shook his head.

The air was so unlike that of the dense Memphis summer, not thick and hazy, this making sensations focused and sharp from a far way off. It was still cool enough that the afternoon gave my face a rough tingle. Huge yellow Cats blew black diesel smoke through their stacks and graded the mounds of trash flat under cleated iron wheels, chasing the trucks where they spilled garbage out behind.

Bull pulled ours to a stop, air brakes gave a sigh and hydraulics wheezed as he lifted

the back and began to inch forward to work the garbage out. The crew's job was to grab a shovel or rake and help it, guide it out in a rough line to keep the masher from clogging up. I bent over and clutched the rake handle, threw all my upper weight into pulling the trash smoothly back and forth till I could feel the muscles of my triceps burn. I lifted my face and saw off in the near distance to the east, through that clear air, one of the older landfills. It had been packed down to about a third of the one we now used, flat as a mirror and covered in the new lime green fuzz of growing winter ryegrass. White chalk lines of three soccer fields were sketched blueprint-precise across the fine carpet, and goalposts stood at the ends of each with nets hanging from a corner, waiting to be strung.

I looked back to my work and saw that Spence had been watching me. "I bet you played you some soccer growing up, didn't you?" he said, smirking. A couple of the other guys, Smiley and Ridge, chuckled as if it were something said just to pass the time.

"No, I never have," I said, half smiling, being a good sport if I could.

"Well then," Spence said, "was it tennis? Or golf?" and he asked in this queasy English accent with his index finger touching his thumb and his pinkie curled up. The other guys didn't laugh then, and neither did I.

"No, I played a little basketball. That's it."

"Basketball, my ass," he snorted. I put my rake up and climbed back on and didn't say anything else. On the way down the landfill, I didn't even look toward Spence, but turned to the new fields and marveled at how men could pack garbage that was still a long time rotting down tight enough to cover it over to appear so new, actually make it recreational. And then just forget all about it.

I had a feeling at the landfill that Spence wasn't going to be as easy as the others, saw

a hardness in his eyes that suggested he would keep pushing, and sure enough, he did. The truck heaved into the lot at Scott Street and I reached for a red shop-rag in my back pocket to wipe my nose and eyes, tingling wet from the cool wind. I walked behind Spence and the others through the glass door to the locker room.

I went to my locker, opened the door and took off the uniform shirt, then the white T-shirt stained faint with sweat, and put on a fresh one from the folded stack. I usually take a shower when I get home, and put on another shirt then, but I like the feeling of clean dress right when I'm done handling garbage. I rubbed my hands with the cleaner I keep in a jug on the top shelf and dried them with a white towel hanging on a hook in the back. I could feel someone there, close behind me.

“So that’s how you’re here.” Spence’s voice. “You’re that old boss-man’s kid.”

Then I remembered and looked to the right at the picture taped to my locker door above the vent slots, the last photo of me and my mother and father together. One of those posed studio shots, Dad seated and his suited upper half showing, me and Mother standing behind, my right hand on one of his spacious shoulders and both hers crossed and resting on the other, all of us smiling in grained Kodak color.

“Yeah, I’ve read about all about it. He was in charge when King was murdered,” Spence said, sucking his teeth. I turned and faced him and our eyes were level, two or three feet apart. “Here’s the thing about him,” he gestured around me, tapping the inside of the locker door with his knuckle. “Some think he wasn’t as bad, that he wadn’t like the others who hated men just ‘cause they skin was *black*,” he leaned in a little, “but the truth was he didn’t even *care*.”

I could feel my body knotting up. I said, straight and even, “He did care. He was on

their side of it.”

He went on like I had said nothing, and the other guys listened in, Bull and even Smiley moving like they might say something to stop him. “No, the truth is he didn’t see men here at all. He didn’t give a damn. He pushed for what they wanted. Sure. Whatever would make them happy enough to keep picking up his trash.” And he laughed. Right up in my face. Another of those snorts, like he was trying to spit something out, the kind he’d been throwing at me all day.

I moved before he knew, threw my forearm across his neck and pushed him back hard into the lockers on the other side of the room so that it bounced his head off the bent aluminum and we knocked foreheads and I saw spots. “You stupid nigger.” It was my own voice, low and deadened. His teeth gritted and I held my forearm level under his chin, all my weight leaned in.

Then he had gained himself, worked his huge arms between us and I felt the surge of raw strength against me. He pushed me off at the chest and swung one of his square fists across the bottom of my jaw and I tasted the hot run of blood in the same second, stumbled, fell almost to my knees. He rushed me and drove me back over a low bench bolted in the concrete floor, but he was too close and I grabbed a handful of his shirtfront and pulled him with me. We both fell over the bench onto the floor in a heavy, sprawling pile.

I could only hear the noise we made as we wrestled for an advantage. Shuffles, grunts, breath. It wasn’t like other fights where men are around and can make the worst violence somehow good-natured by their yelling, crowded and cheering for one of the two, making bloodiness more comical. It gave me more anger and desperation to end it, to beat him so badly that it would be over and sounds of life would return. I could feel them

watching as if judges, and the silence sickened me and caused the adrenaline to pulse even harder.

Spence worked his way on top of me, though from our wrestling I could tell we were of roughly the same stuff even when he had looked more muscular earlier, so I wasn't going to give in, I knew then. It was an ugly strength I found that had been asleep, reminded in me, beneath something I could think through. He tried to climb to a sitting position on my chest to bind my arms with his knees. A first punch stung my face, I saw the black knuckles coming at my eye and closed it, whiteness and then a sparking behind the lids and thumping pain, but never saw the color or speed of the second when it crashed my nose and I heard a pop, felt more warm blood stream.

He had one of my arms under his knee, but the other slipped when I rolled the whole of my body to buck him off. I couldn't see at all, but I clenched my free hand and threw it up where I thought his face was. I heard a straining gasp and knew from that and the feel of it I had hit him square in the throat. All his weight fell off me then and I felt several hands under my arms pulling me to my feet.

It was still silent. When I could see, Spence was on the far side of the bench circled by two or three people, me the same. No one held us back and we didn't go at each other again. Spence stood there supported by other black hands and heaved in breath and stared at me with a narrow, knowing gaze as if basic and precise facts had been proven, some hypothesis he had long believed and yearned for the chance to test. No one spoke. And when I looked at Bull before grabbing my flannel coat and walking out, his mouth slack on the cigar and eyes slitted at me, I realized the last words spoken had been mine and that they couldn't be explained away afterwards. I wanted to jump Spence again, move things around

on his face with my fists because he had undone in one afternoon what it took me years to make good, the feelings between me and those men who stood and stared at me now, worse than my first day. Jesus, it would take as many years just to hope they'd forget, and I knew I never would. I took my coat, looked away from all of them and walked home.

Less than a week later I came back. Even with me there, we were a man short—Spence had been fired after the fight. I didn't ask any questions, got dressed and assumed I could still be there. I did the job as always but felt for the first time so alone, even more than my first day, as if I were now seeing things at their true depth, with proper apprehension. All the guys acted as if they had no awareness of another person. Over off Park, the truck had stopped and was mashing trash down so there'd be room for the next half of the route. I had just emptied a bucket and set it down, and something, I don't even know what it was now, something metal, caught between the masher and the dirty wall of the truck. It made a godawful screeching noise, metal on metal whine. I reached in to pull it loose and it caught my right hand along with it, pulled into the masher grinding its way toward the cab. It was so quick I don't even remember pain, just blank minutes of space. I must have been screaming, because the masher did stop moving and I was holding the pulped end of my hand with the other good one, saw blood stippled on the inner wall of the truck like legs of red wine down a glass, down the front of my blue shirt when I became nauseous and loosened my grip on the shocked arteries. Until it spilled out from an injury that deep, I had no way of knowing real blood was so dark.

I'm not much in the way of church, but losing two fingers right after what happened with Spence and what I said—when I've never suffered a scratch on the job before or since—makes me think there is a rough sort of justice exacted in this world. And things with

the guys I work with have returned to normal in the five years since. That makes me think they believe as I do, that it could be put behind more quickly because the consequence against me was a swift violence, and harsh. Some of them visited me in the hospital when it happened, even Bull, though words were polite and charity was of the most austere kind. And he still called me by my first name, so I know he didn't hold a grudge too close.

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Friends (and Mother) have always asked me why I do this work. I wish I had some grand answer that made sense of it for them, or to me for that matter. All I have is what everyone does: memories and days and longings for something better. Two images persist, both in the time when King died and then my father two years after. One was a photograph from the front page of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* in the days after King was buried, after a group of unified white ministers had marched in a bobbing black stripe of their official dress down Poplar to Mayor Loeb's office to tell him, surely, after all this, he would meet the demands of the garbage workers and allow them to unionize. (The picture wasn't of them, I can just remember that as the pressing news of the day, and that my father said he hoped now it would all end, thank God.) The photograph I saved has the frame of the window where James Earl Ray shouldered his rifle, the camera aimed, as he did, from the tired boarding house down to the Lorraine Motel, where King stood and then fell mornings before, an uneven oval stain on the concrete of the balcony still visible. There are no people in the photograph, but only the places of the event. I remember what drew me as a child to sit on the sofa with that sheet of newspaper spread before me on the glass coffee table. Thinking

that I was seeing it as a murderer would have, looking down on small black figures a hundred yards away, maybe the distance would make it easier to feel the trigger go under my own finger. And the thought sickened me with shame and fear, at nine years old.

Something else I noticed too, long after the photo had been ripped from the front page and stuck in a book in my bedroom for me to return to several times. If I looked down, from the space of the window to the low Lorraine Motel at the other end, there was a vacant lot between, blanketed with garbage. A wrecked fridge, I remember, part of a fence with pickets along it, an oil drum, frayed tires, and heaps of things I haven't been able to make out as my fingers have progressively smudged the ink. Trash is what separates the two buildings. I don't know why the thought stays with me.

The other memory is no photograph, but my own life, my small world at the time when Dad could no longer enjoy Mother or me freely, because of the things bearing down. It was a time after the strike trouble had come to fruition, long after the beginning when two garbage workers were crushed to death in one of the older trucks, which were to be replaced only a month later. One man who became the leader of the movement took tragedy as the call to finally strike, to demand things that should have already been long secure. My father told Mother that he actually liked this man, had never had any trouble with him, but that he still had to be sure that the garbage was picked up while the strike was sorted out. The man took it as the obvious sign of my father's animosity toward their welfare, toward what they were doing, and began to say things about him that the papers reported, telling of hates I know my father did not hold. The men who had worked under him so well before would spit at him and yell as he crossed the picket lines, leading the scab workers he had found to the job he still had to do. They took it as a further sign of his callousness to them, even

though at the same time he supported and signed off on resolutions, proposals, anything that would ensure they got a fair shake at their work and could finally do it safely. They saw it as his hypocrisy. I see it as who my father was. His gifts did not lie with discerning the hearts of men, nor balancing out motives, but with managing the movement of things to safe and proper distances. It was still his job, and he would die doing it. Maybe he didn't care, or *couldn't* in certain ways, just as Spence said.

But this other memory tempers any harsher thoughts I might ever entertain toward my father. The night King was shot and for days after, Dad was deeply disturbed, vacant and fumbling around the house. He worked those days. He came home one evening, no less dazed but with a brand of determination, and asked my Mother to put on her Sunday dress, asked me to get dressed too, "Coat and tie."

"Where are we going, Benjamin?" my mother asked, concerned for him.

"Please," all he said in answer.

He came into my room a few minutes later as I was lacing my dress shoes. "Here." He pulled my shoulders up, him as tall bent on one knee as me sitting on the bed, fitting a black tie around my collar and fixing the knot by the memory in his huge hands, cinching it down tight.

"Ow, Dad," I said, "it's choking me."

"Oh, sorry." He focused on my face for the first time since he'd come home, paused and smiled, flattened the part in my hair with the width of his palm.

I sat on the broad back seat of our huge Buick, my view out flanked by Mother's trailing hair over her slender shoulder on the right, the hard angles of Dad's hat and tremendous dark of his head and back on the left. Inside warmed by the amber glow of the

dash and outside world rendered by overlapping hourglasses of the headlights.

When we slowed to an intersection pulsing blue and then night where a motorcycle cop directed traffic through with a melodic sweep of his hand, our headlights turned onto a dark line of people stretching off down a sidewalk and around a corner farther than I could see. The line led up the stairs of a church and inside, both doors flung open with a line coming out the other, down the stairs, just as slow and quiet and far-reaching into the dark as the one going in. My father slowed the car, took off his hat and set it on the bench seat in the ample space between him and my mother, kept an even speed. I looked over the sill of the door, fogging the glass with my breathing. I wiped it clean with the sleeve of my blazer, and saw a man in the line chewing a cigar looking right at me. He shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat, spat on the ground, and looked away as he shuffled forward. When we passed the corner Dad put his hat back on and drove us straight home.

I went to change and came back to say goodnight. My father was sitting at our small kitchen table in one of the slight metal and vinyl chairs, making him look all the larger under the fluorescent glow of the light over the sink. Mother stood at his back, relaxing his shoulders under her rubbing hands. There was a bowl of fresh-peeled peaches at the corner of the table. (She had found his favorite fruit, in and out of season, somehow, to offer him at the end of days during that whole time.) Dad was saying this was insane, he couldn't see how it had all come to this, but he just couldn't resign now, though he felt spent and pulled every which way. Mother told him sure he could quit, we'll make do with savings for a while. He sighed and let his solid hand fall on the table, surprising the bowl of peaches to jump and sit again. "Baby, it still has to get picked up. Quit in the middle of this? It'd take weeks, months probably, to find my replacement. I can't just leave and watch it sit in the

streets.” And I heard him make a deep, catching sob, when I had never even seen my father’s tears. It made me feel ashamed of him and proud and scared for him all at the same time. And I felt sick, like the falling on a roller-coaster. I backed quietly out of the living room and cried myself to sleep.

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And so my story comes to a time much more recent, last Friday, the third of October. It began with brooding clouds, indistinct, shifting in whites and grays before a darkened horizon as if a storm might whip up with the right pushing of wind. There was no rain, though, thank God—rain makes garbage work a misery regardless of the temperature. Everything congeals and runs in a soupy mess.

I was working a morning to afternoon shift with the main crew—what I call the three who I’ve worked with the longest—Bull, Smiley, and Blackburn. We were on one of the east Memphis routes, where the houses are stable and expansive sitting on practiced and even lawns. Our faded truck groaned along the curbless fringe of Shady Grove, one of the prettiest streets in town, I think, from the elegant way the aged trees canopy the road. Bull saw one of his friends, a guy named Young who owns a lawn service. We’ve crossed him in this part of town a decent amount. He’s usually just waved to us and gone on about his work, but that morning he saw the truck, killed the loud weed trimmer shaking in his hands and hailed Bull to stop.

“Mornin’ men,” Young said. He climbed the running board on the passenger side and draped an arm in the sill, glanced at me and looked to Smiley and Bull in the cab.

Blackburn hung from the driver's side behind Bull. "You fellas been to vote yet?" He seemed to be talking more at the three of them.

"Naw," Bull said. "We gonna finish this run and drop by before lunch. You?"

Young smiled. "Took my crew by first thing this morning." He slapped the sill with his hand and jumped down. "Don't forget, now."

"I ain't gonna forget. See to yourself," Bull said, and jumped the truck into first and spat the slobbered chunk of cigar out the window.

Young chuckled at Bull's feigned offense and yelled from the green of the yard, "I think we got a shot at it. Don't forget!" He laughed and picked up the trimmer and jerked the cord so that it chattered again in his hand.

I jumped down a block later and walked to the drive at the corner of Shady Grove and White Station. A young married couple lives there, her husband's a doctor or lawyer or sells bonds or something, one of those tasks guaranteeing large amounts of money in this city, judging from the perfection of their home and expense of vehicles parked in the three-car garage. No one ever talks to the garbageman, but that's precisely why I remember this house, because of the young wife's kindnesses. She's always on her way out when we make the pickup, and she makes it a point to stop and wave as she leaves the driveway, or rolls down the window of her BMW to say good morning to me. This morning her car was still parked in its immaculate slot in the garage dressed by trimmed ivy. The light in the kitchen wasn't even on, as it always was by this time.

I pulled the two green buckets standing by their brick mailbox out into the street and waited for the truck, flipped the top of one can open, and it held a week's worth of trash. The second surprised me. It held a white plastic car with eyes for headlights and a smile for

the front bumper facing up at me, brand new. I pulled it out, and beneath was a pile of toys never used—colored rings stacked on a plastic pole, a Pat-the-Bunny board book, others that squeaked when I picked the car off the top of them. Under it all were two shiny garbage bags of baby clothes with the tags still affixed, the trash bags so new they had a static feel and faint rubber smell.

The guys didn't want any of it when I showed them, so I dumped it into the gape of the truck and saw it swallowed by the hydraulic masher like everything else. Strange to think what made it trash was the fact of passing through human hands, unused, but tarnished all the same. Handled by people, purposes in mind, and then thrown away. I looked toward the house when I put the wheeled buckets back on the curb. I thought I saw a hand pull back and a drape sway in the darkened front window, but I can't be sure.

After the pickup, Bull drove to one of the high school gymnasiums closer to our end of town, past a line of people walking with posterboards before them across the drive's entrance, more standing on the corner and waving. "We'll grab lunch after," he said, and banged the door closed on the driver's side.

It took about fifteen minutes for the four of us to finish voting, and then Bull drove to the Mrs. Winner's Chicken on Poplar. When I leaned in and asked why he was on that street in the middle of the day, thinking he wasn't paying attention while talking to Smiley, he said, "Don't get over on Poplar much. Nice change of pace." Traffic backed up behind us and cars honked as he turned into the lot and parked.

I ordered a large chicken sandwich and slaw and potatoes with gravy, and tea, sweet. They liked to get a family order when we came here, split it three ways because it was cheaper, so I waited until theirs was out and they sat down around the table and divvied it

up.

Bull ripped a wing away from a breast and shoved it in his mouth. He asked, "Well, who'd you vote for?" and looked to me, wiping grease from his mouth in a glistening stripe across the back of his hand.

I didn't really want to talk about it. The mayoral race was between an incumbent and the first black candidate who would ever hold that Memphis office in history, if elected. It had been a haymaker in the hands of the press for months and seemed to give the whole town a shaky feeling, testing the city's foundation by pushing reports of black or white support, and publishing premature tallies by counting up the votes simply by the color of those who could cast them. I tried to ignore the whole thing. But I did vote for the incumbent. I thought he'd done a pretty good job overall. That was it. Herenton, the black challenger, was untested in real politics, a former school superintendent. No way to tell what he might do in office.

"Hackett," I answered as casually as possible, like saying what color socks I was wearing. I shoveled a plastic fork full of slaw in my mouth and patted my chin with the white square of napkin. "He's done okay so far, I thought."

"Don't fix what ain't broke, that type thing," Blackburn offered. He tore a roll in half and dabbed it at a half moon of gravy circling the edge of his tilted plate.

"Yeah, I guess something like that. It's just a mayor we're taking about, not God. I don't think it's as big a deal as everyone's tried to make it."

Smiley was holding the empty chicken bucket above his mouth. He made a slight pinch at the edge and funneled the fried kernels at the bottom onto his tongue. "So you sayin' you wouldn't be too upset who won? S'at right?" He chewed and grinned at me. But

he was always grinning.

“I don’t know. I guess not,” I said.

Bull wiped his face with a napkin and rubbed his hands across the back of his pants as he stood. “It’ll be decided before too long, I s’pose.” The three of us pushed away from the table and left the plates and napkins and scattered chicken bones strewn on the red plastic trays.

As we drove back to Scott Street, the wind had kicked up and the sky was more undecided, smoky but bled from behind by a dark strip from the ground to the height of trees and buildings. I was glad we had been able to sit and eat, converse about the election without talking in blacks and whites. It made me proud, in a way, that we didn’t have to mention it. That showed some progress for all these years of work, that good had come. The truck swayed when a bolt of wind hit it crosswise passing under the viaduct and blew what trash was left swirling out the back and onto the street.

I walked among them into the locker room. It was about four in the afternoon, several others in there, changing, showering, hurrying to their weekends. A television was mounted in the corner, hung from the ceiling by two metal brackets on the side and two across the front at top and bottom to prevent it being taken home. Most times it played music videos, rhythm and rap from BET with the noise dimmed down, but today it was blaring one of the local stations, Channel 5, and it looked like they were giving hourly updates of the election’s progress.

I opened my locker and went through my same daily routine of pre-cleanliness before I went home to shower. Off with the spoiled blue uniform shirt, thrown to the floor to go home and in the wash, then the spent white T-shirt, same pile. On with the fresh one

from the neat stack, scrub my roughened hands with the cleanser and wipe the filth clear of them with my white hanging towel. I turned and looked up at the TV head talking from the corner as I rubbed the towel over my hands in pauses (a simple pleasure, to feel the washed cotton against the soft of the sanitizing lotion on the skin of my remaining fingers). It blurted in factual-seeming news talk that the challenger Herenton had taken an early, surprising but solid lead. It would come to be that he won the election by only about one-hundred fifty votes, but all that moment showed was him in front of the white incumbent and pulling away.

I glanced at Bull and saw that he had his foot on the bench, unlacing his workboot, and that he had looked from the TV to me at the same time. He kind of smiled, unlooped another lace and said, "Well, Hallow, I guess things might be turnin' around for us, finally after all."

I realized a few things all at once. I saw a likeness in his smile to that one Spence had given me, no smile at all, and I tasted the same urge to say the words I had called Spence years before, to direct them now to Bull. I also knew he said "us" in a way that didn't include me, though we had done the same job for fifteen years. And standing at my locker looking across the room to him at the bench, one leg up and smiling, the distance between us then seemed more like miles than the few feet of bare concrete it was.

So I decided it would be best to put more space between us then, avoid saying something I didn't mean or would regret. I shut the locker and left the room without looking at any of them. Best to let it all die down. My Volkswagen was parked in the side lot—I'd driven that day, not knowing that early morning what the weather would do—and I climbed in and chattered out of the parking lot in a cloud of black smoke as fast as the small

engine would push. I was only a quarter mile from home, but I didn't want to go there.

I drove west, got back on Poplar and headed toward downtown. At first I felt a little more at ease, enjoyed a puny satisfaction that any anger or ugly words toward Bull had been packed down tight. The shadowed structures grew up progressively along the cross streets of downtown, Third, then Second. But what difference did it make to keep quiet and play a part for so long? It earned me nothing all these years. Took just one moment of time elevated above others to unearth his view of me as cracker, honkey, whatever the name for it was these days and the same instant for me to blur the face I'd seen for more than a decade now into merely spook, nigger, other words loose in my head. Wind threaded between the buildings with such focus it rocked my small car on its springs. I went on past Main and then intersected Front, the last of streets before a slope to the wide brown of the languishing River. The curled backs of my hands on the steering wheel beaded in cold drops of sweat and I noticed a bulge in my stomach and the biled taste signaling nausea. I swung to the curb, could feel the crawling up my throat, put the shifter into park and flipped the hazards blinking and climbed out to keep from getting sick in my car.

I thought I would walk a block or two to let my insides settle, but I felt no better and kept on. The distended M of the bridge to Arkansas swelled up against the churning swirl of the leaden sky, dim lights outlining its spans. I made toward it and began the steady incline of its sidewalk and the backs of my legs strained. (Collecting garbage in Memphis had never called for short pushes up a hill; it was always the flat walk across a sprawling horizon.) I kept moving and the hard air against me helped me swallow and breathe in some. I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds and smelled the waft of barbecue, heard the sounds of music, probably from Beale, carried on the rush of wind. Mother always did say the best

part of the city was what you couldn't see, letting it come through your ears and nostrils.

I had crested the bridge and could see it begin to fall off toward the far side, turned and leaned my forearms on the rail overlooking the city back to my left, and down on the ridged, cinnamon waters below. I could see the rust-quilted pattern of cobblestones at the River's edge, where my father had first made his way, and the shadowed outline of Memphis standing behind. I don't know if it was bad slaw or the great distance at which I now stood from it all or some inner dis-ease inherited from my father's unknown and violent people, but I felt a hot rise within and gagged everything in a choking heave over the railing. I gasped and pulled back, struggling for air, didn't make it far enough the second time and got what was left down the front of my white undershirt. Then heaved again and again, each fouler and less until I thought the muscles in my gut and hams of my thighs might pull away from bone with the wrenching.

When I felt no more, I slumped with my back against the concrete below the rail and tried to take a smooth breath. A roughened figure was standing on the far side of the bridge facing traffic headed for Arkansas. He looked to be homeless, maybe seeking a ride out of town. The man had noticed me too, and began watching the rushing cars coming at him, looking for a safe gap to cross. I couldn't believe this bum was going to hit me up for help, but I still felt too uneven to stand and walk away. As he crossed over the center guardrail in a trail of tattered overcoat, I could see a frayed rectangle of cardboard dancing in his swinging hand as he limped across the near lanes with Spare Change? scrawled across one side in red marker.

I pushed up onto the edge of the rail with my elbows and faced to ward him off. He stepped onto the level of the sidewalk, hands covered by matted gloves and a dark bushy

beard far up on his face, blue deep bruises covering the skin I could see so that it wasn't possible to make out his real features or even what color he was. He looked at me for a moment and kneaded his broken lips in a chewing circle. He smelled rotten. A gloved hand dove deep in one of his front pockets and I jerked, thinking he might knife me, but the fist raised level to drop what was held into my own. I moved my hand up, slow to open, and when it did, he dropped a quarter into my palm and stood and chewed a second longer, shrugged and swung away from me to work the traffic coming at us. The coin was fouled with sweat and had dirt caked on the edges like he'd found it somewhere. I guess in the blue uniform pants stained by the day's garbage, my muddy boots, and the front of my T-shirt spattered yellow and stinking by what had been inside, the beggar saw me as one of his own. I clutched the quarter with my bad hand and steadied myself on the rail to point back home, hoping desperately I'd be better by morning.



Nathan's Vision

Nathan Paterne opened his eyes and squinted, tried to focus on the back of his wife's black bushy head in the sepia light of the small bedroom. It was early morning. He blinked his right eye and then his left to fight the milkiness from his view. Nathan rubbed his hand over the swollen hump of his wife's hip and patted the covers. He rolled over and away from her side of the bed, swung his feet to the floor and into the size twelve workboots resting where he knew they would be. He slept in a workshirt and faded khaki pants during the planting season so that all he had to put on in the mornings would be boots and a belt. Nathan hummed as he fastened the laces around the brass stays and tied them; behind him Pauline inhaled deeply and shushed the covers around. He patted the rump again and said Morning, glory.

The hallway to the bathroom had the dapples of dawn across it, a picture on the wall of three sons—Paul, Alvin Neal, and Stewart—caught in the halfflight. Nathan didn't look at the picture or at the wall because he did not look to the sides when he walked, always somewhere to go to do something when it was a day to work. He aimed into the bathroom and puckered his lips to view both his cheeks in the round gold-framed mirror. The razor thocked across the strop as he sharpened it, then the lather and stubble came off in swaths of dirty blue splashed around the drain.

Alvin Neal was already sitting in the kitchen when Nathan Paterne came in, and he looked up at his father through sleepy slits of eyes beneath a short forehead and a flat-top of

tanned stubby hair. His head sat directly on his body, like a pumpkin atop a used oil drum.

“Mornin, Nub,” Nathan said to his son.

“Mornin, Paw.”

Pauline was always a back to them this time of day, elbows and arms moving in smooth motion like a conductor, coaxing spats and sizzles out of the faint smoke rising from the stovetop. She shook a peppershaker shaped like a birdhouse into the thickest pile of smoke.

Alvin Neal was the only son still in the house, the last left in Ripley, though two of the three were still in Tennessee. Nathan’s eldest son, Paul, told his father one day that he wanted to go to college. It had not been a bold, fist-shaking decree. One morning before the four of them went into the fields, Paul stood at the end of the breakfast table with hands clasped before him, as if asking a banker for a loan, and made his request. Nathan placed both of his palms on the table and looked to Pauline for a moment when she turned as if on a swivel away from the stove when Paul asked, and then he told his son, “That would be fine.”

Paul left that morning. When Nathan walked his son out of the house, they exchanged a handshake, and he stood on the doorstep above his son holding the door open. He was happy, in a sense, for his son to be deciding his own way, assuming his own responsibilities. There were no smiles or tears between them, the goodbye polite as a train conductor ushering a passenger to the last stop on the line. That was two years ago now.

“Thought we might get down to the bottom before dinner, cut out some of those oaks and take em to the mill today,” he said to Alvin Neal.

“We don’t need to get in the field?”

“Naw,” Nathan grunted. “Lemme bless first.” He bowed his head. “Lord make us thankful for these and all other blessings for Chrissakes amen.” He fisted a forkful of steaming eggs into his mouth. “This stand of wheat is comin in fine. We can let it grow on its own today. I want to sell some timber to cover what Waddell’s goin to charge me to fix the header on that combine.”

“Yesir.” Alvin Neal took two huge bites of a biscuit thick with ham and picked himself up from his chair, pushing off the table with his knuckles. He pulled a crumpled mesh-backed cap from a pressboard hook mounted on the paneled wall. A thick smudge of grease ran across the AT in CATERPILLAR stitched on the front above the bill. “I’ll start the truck.”

He’s a good boy Nathan thought. Pauline skished away from the stove in her pink houseshoes across the linoleum floor. She unlocked the sliding glass door and threw a panful of grease into the back yard; a hiss sounded from the dewy spring grass. She turned and Nathan took the skillet from her and set it on the table, wrapping his other arm around her thick, aproned waist. He squeezed tighter, feeling the oval comfort of her big soft breasts against his stomach, tilted his face and kissed her on the forehead.

“You make a man happy, Pauline.”

She smiled up at him and stood on tip-toes to kiss him on the chin. “You and Alvin Neal better get going. I’ll see you supertime.” Her round face was a smile that infected all her other features. Her own mother had been a grey and rigid housekeeper. Pauline treated happiness like another household necessity requiring her attention. Now her smile was a habit long formed.

Nathan stepped out into the carport and hooked his thumbs into the front beltloops

of his pants. The sun was breaking in rose streaks across the grey clouds littered by black dots of chirping birds. The modest brick ranch-style house sat atop a rounded swell of earth slanting down in front for a hundred yards before it melted into the highway. Behind the house the tidy lawn ended in a garden, enveloped on three sides by the field of new green-growing wheat.

“I think this thing’s about to thow a rod,” Alvin Neal said from the cab of the big diesel, the whole body shivering under the steady knock of the engine. Nathan stared at the 1955 International, new eight years ago, and narrowed his eyes for a second. “It started that a while back. We’ll have Waddell check it out before next logging season.”

Nathan walked to the driver’s side of the cab, N.H. PATERNE & SON stenciled on the worn red door. The paint was a darker shade, still glossy, in the space after the final N. He shook his head and heaved himself up by the steering wheel behind the driver’s seat and slammed the door.

The final S came off after Stewart, his youngest, approached him on the narrow front porch one Sunday afternoon and declared, “Paw, I am going to marry.” A moment after, Nathan turned his head and saw a radiant girl trailed by night-dark hair riding up the smooth incline of the driveway perched sidesaddle on a camel. He blinked. He looked to his son, who smiled and darted his eyes nervously toward the girl, then back to his father.

“Paw, her father has a circus, and he says I can travel and learn the business when we are married aright.” Stewart swayed forward on the balls of his feet, almost outright giddy.

Nathan blinked again. The girl now sat the camel only ten feet from the porch, a slender Arabian grin visible beneath the sheen of her veil. She *was* beautiful, the olive skin of her cheeks exotic above the fabric, her brown-black eyes sadly mysterious. *This girl is no more*

than fifteen he thought. A lavender cord cinched the waist of the black flowing robe concealing her from neck to toe. Her hood was off, tucked under the saddle blanket on the camel's hump. The two men sweated in short cotton sleeves even on the shade of the porch, but there was no moisture visible on her. *J. Naifeh's GREAT EVANGEL Circus* stood raised in gold letters across the brilliant purple blanket. Nathan felt his son's hand pat his back two times and Stewart said, "I'll write when we hit the next town. Give Mamaw my love." He hopped from the porch and climbed the back of the camel behind her straight figure. Stewart's hand shot up in a wave when the camel turned onto the gravel median of the highway. Nathan found out later from Thompson Wadsworth that the man was a Lebanese who brought his circus—the main attractions being a medium-sized elephant and a rust-colored Ferris wheel that moaned when it turned—to Covington, ten miles to the south. Stewart later sent one postcard that said they were home in Biloxi, Mississippi, for a week, and that he was fine, hoped you were too, give Mamaw my love. That was six months ago. Nathan Paterno did not use words or thoughts like *crazy dumb-ass kid*, but if he said or thought such, that would be his two bits on the matter. He could not tell his son no; Stewart was eighteen, and Nathan contented himself only in the thought that a man has to grow and eat and sell the fruit of his own choices.

*

Nathan locked the heavy gearshift in place and brought the big diesel to a high whine on the flat highway. He snaked the rig and trailer off in front of a pump at Thompson Wadsworth's store a mile and a half later. A big neon sign—only part of it buzzed on and off

now—read Wads It Worth To You?? The sign leaned forward above the squat cinder block building which housed gasoline, groceries, live bait year-round, and fireworks out of a mobile home attached to the side, open two times a year—the Fourth of July and New Year’s.

The bell on the greasy glass door tinked when Nathan Paterne and Alvin Neal entered. Thompson’s head shot up from behind stacked coils of fence wire in the center of the plank-floored store.

“Well, mornin Nathan. Mornin, Nub. Nathan, you ever see this boy play football?” Thompson pointed repeatedly in the direction of Alvin Neal.

“Yeah, I saw him play. A might good at it, my recollection.”

“A might good?” Thompson slapped Alvin Neal on the back, Alvin Neal laughing already as he made his way past him to the dust-frosted shelves. Thompson swung his too-big hands up above his head as if they were a pair of gloves he wanted to throw off. “Could stop an offense with just him and the kicker! You must not’ve seen him play, else he’d be in Knoxville now, knockin the helmets off them girls they suited up this year.”

“A couple of baloney sandwiches, if it’s no trouble,” Nathan said. Thompson held up his hands in mock offense at being ignored and moved behind the counter to slice the long tube of meat. Thompson would say the same thing to Nathan every time he saw him with Alvin Neal, ever since Alvin Neal’s first game as a sophomore for Ripley High six years ago. Having no neck and weighing two-hundred fifty pounds at fifteen, Alvin Neal moved other kids on the field like clearing dishes from a table. He took the team to the state semi-finals the three years he played.

Thompson volunteered to drive the team bus to away games, where he could mess

with people who did not know him. He was the resident jester of Ripley, and friends allowed themselves to be fooled several times over, even when they knew the particular joke, paying with their pride to see him perfect his craft. But Wadsworth occasionally craved the feel of fresh clay.

He still enjoyed moderate regional fame for a performance at Dyersburg High three years before. Thompson unloaded the team at the fieldhouse, and as they went in to suit up, he moved the bus between Dyersburg's locker room and the field and left the hazards blinking and the small stop sign extended. The arch-rival Dyersburg boys boiled out of the locker room, looking for blood and ready to knock things down, and found a fifty-year-old man standing before the open door of the bus gawking at the sky and pointing. First, ten or twelve players gathered to stare at him and uttered uncertain laughs—Thompson took no note of their presence, only muttered to himself once or twice, “Where’d they go? Where’d they go?” Within three minutes, the whole team, coaches and cheerleaders too, were huddled around him searching the heavens as Thompson teared up and began to sob. Then Ripley exploded onto the home team’s field in a mad streak of purple and white past them to the sideline, and Thompson finally looked at his audience, smiled, and asked, “Did y’all see where they went?” He fell back through the bus door and closed it before they could grab him and sped off to the parking lot. Dyersburg recovered sometime after the half, when security took Thompson from the sidelines and threw him back into the parking lot after yelling at Dyersburg’s All-State running back, “Do you see ‘em, boy!” every time he touched the ball. (He stood on the roof of the bus and yelled it through a bullhorn for the second half.) The Memphis paper listed Wadsworth by name as Ripley’s unofficial mvp in the victory.

Alvin Neal joined Nathan and Thompson at the front counter, sliding two dusty boxes of vanilla wafers to the register. He reached down and opened the red cooler marked *Coca Cola* and fished out two ice-sweating Chocolate Soldiers.

“Nathan, why don’t you let me buy y’alls lunch today. Make me happy before I die. Good Lord says a man ought to lay down his life for his friends. Reckon that means his wallet too, sometimes.”

“Apostle Paul says a man can’t provide for his own family is worse than a unbeliever,” Nathan answered. The Paternes had settled in Ripley four generations before and no one could remember them asking or taking help, though they were obliged to give it when others found themselves in need. Nathan Paterne understood that as his legacy to carry on here, to trust to himself as much as his father and grandfather had, to learn from his own and then provide for his own without complaint. It made him proud to know he was beholden to no man and had only done good unto those around him as much as he could. At that thought, he paid Thompson an extra quarter and said, “Give it to that boy next door to save up for some poppers this Fourth of July.”

“Mighty kind, Nathan. Thank you.” Thompson took the quarter from Nathan’s hand and flipped it in the air, opening a low drawer beneath the counter to catch it. “Someday, you’re gonna let me buy you a sandwich at least. You can’t begrudge me layin down to die a happy man.” Thompson put the sandwiches and boxes and drinks in a paper sack and thrust it at him in false disgust.

“I reckon we’re doin fine,” Nathan said, laughing a little. “Thank you for your time, Thompson.”

*

When Nathan slid the idling two-ton truck down the muddy road, fog was lifting in flat patches above the bright green wheat stand in the bottoms. *Clutch, spin, double-clutch.* The double-axle of tires on the back of the diesel sent rich, blue-brown dirt arcing off in meaty clods as Nathan slithered the rig skillfully down level with his crops. The sun was a small orange ball sitting on the three-foot wheat joining the baby blue sky at the horizon. He could see the wind moving like a wave in the wheat, though the trees had only short buds on them in early spring and had no leaves to show the path of the wind as it left the field.

If we can get three big oaks, it will pay Waddell to fix the header on that combine. Nathan pointed at Alvin Neal when he jumped from the cab to fetch the long saw. This was land his great grandfather claimed and paid for, and it made him think about Goldilocks and those three bears. *Not too hot, not too cold, juuust right.* Only that part. It was in the bottoms of the Mississippi, where the big river would run over its wide banks once a year and feed the soil out of the massive flow. But this land was just far enough away where it wouldn't flood and leave standing water or ruin a crop, like others he knew around him. It also had a wide, raised ridge of old-growth timber running along the south edge of the field, and his great grandfather made sure that his survey captured that mile-long stretch all the way to the River. Nathan and his sons would do contract logging when there were no crops, but he would only pull from this private stand of trees to pay for unseen expenses, which kept him safe from ever taking out a bank loan.

"Which ones you want to get?" Alvin Neal asked his father. Nathan pointed

without pause to three massive oaks in a stand of dogwoods, each oak at least six feet through the center. Alvin Neal hoisted the long saw over one shoulder as a soldier in formation would and marched off toward the trees. He flung his hands and feet forward, walking out of his hips, trying to make his limbs keep up with his thick body once it gained momentum.

The two stood opposite one another with the tree between. Each gripped the fat handle on the ends of the jagged, fresh-sharpened saw and let it come to rest for a moment at a notch three feet up the base. Alvin Neal made the first pull toward himself, and Nathan was unprepared for the violence of the initial jerk. He was six-two and strung with hard, lean muscle, but his son was brute strength masked by flesh. Once when the four of them were down here with the bulldozer, the Cat slipped a tread and the wrench was missing from the toolbox. Alvin Neal gripped the hand-big nut and unscrewed it from the bolt, and screwed it back tight when the tread was again in its groove. When they set to work on the Cat at home in the barn, the nut had to be pried loose with the air-wrench.

In three hours they were finished, and they ate Thompson's fat baloney sandwiches on white bread for lunch, sitting on one of the clean-cut stumps. It took another hour to load the timber on the truck and make the mile drive atop the ridge to the River. Nathan Paterno had his own barge tethered at the riverbank where he could offload his own timber and see it downstream to the mill above Memphis. Alvin Neal slipped down from the cab and moved to the back of the trailer. Nathan clambered down and stood at the end of the cab, pulling on his heavy gloves. *A good day's work.* He was satisfied with the entire arrangement, including, if there could only be one who stayed to farm with him, it should be Alvin Neal. *Just right.* He was not ambitious or reckless, not too smart for his own good or

too dumb. He was as steady as a tractor with new tires, and stronger by a good bit.

Nathan marveled at the girth of the trees on the trailer and estimated in his head what price he could get by the foot. He could not have said what he was looking at as he pulled the chock that sent the three trees falling with a glorious crash to the deck of the barge.

*

He could not think until he was back in his own house two nights later. Now Nathan Paterne drew back his memory, wanting to understand what he had seen. He could see at the moment, faint, in the guest bedroom off the den, a pale foot with a white-meshed cast beginning at the ankle and running up into the darkness. He could see the straightfaced doctor from a night ago in Memphis a little clearer now in his head, standing there in hospital white with the blue mask loose around his neck, nodding in grave concern and showing him charts with graphs that he did not understand. Even more vivid was the sight of his own hands two days ago, tugging under the armpits of Alvin Neal, slumped and slashed, heavy as a sack of feed as Nathan cried out to lift him from the mud-caked floor of the barge.

The image in sharpest relief, frozen like a photograph in his mind, was a view from the back of the cab of the truck, looking down on the barge. The only motion the graceful falling of the massive logs after he pulled the chock free, and in the center, the upheld forearm of his son, thick and hard as a country ham, still held skyward to fend off the blows even after the second and third logs had come to rest, covering him.

*

He woke after fitful sleep. It was Sunday morning. Pauline stood in the doorway with his tie and his suit on a hanger.

“I’ve stayed up watching him last night. He breathes alright, but he hasn’t woke up yet.” Pauline’s face was not a smile anymore. “You’ll have to go to church without me. People will expect us there today.” Her voice did not make the sound of request, or of command. Just of what things had been and were to that time. He stood and took the hanger from her. Her head was a black blur in his tears as he held her to him.

Nathan could hardly see as he pulled the long Ford sedan into the parking lot of the Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church. The church sat a half mile from Thompson Wadsworth’s on a faint mound, where Nathan’s own, and Pauline’s, were buried beneath the tombstones of the cemetery beside the church. He could hear the nasal drone of loud hymn singing as he climbed the steps and took the knob in his shaking hand. The choir and congregation fell silent for only a moment, regaining their place as he took an aisle seat on the empty second pew. As the hymn ended and the preacher rose to give his sermon, he looked once at him from the pulpit and realized from the eyes that Nathan Paterne did not want to be made a reference of any kind. He began to preach.

Nathan looked at the preacher through watery eyes. He tried to blink his tears, tilting his head to hold them back. As he did, he gazed over the preacher up to the pasty white Jesus framed on the paneled wall behind the choir. He felt his gut tighten and balled up his fists on the pew cushion. Nathan did not consider himself too religious a man. He

came to church to pay his respects for the life he had, not to get anything. Now he stared at the picture and thought *Is this what comes of it? What I've been coming here and dropping my good hard-earned money for? Guaranteeing my own and my family's here-everafter lives for the likes of you?*

He stared at the picture even after the preacher finished. The ushers gathered at the front, bowed their heads, and handed communion down the pews. Nathan had always let it pass him by before. He took a cup of grape juice and one of the saucered white wafers and turned his gaze to the preacher. The preacher took a perfect loaf of bread and ripped it down the middle. He said, "And when He had given thanks He brake it and said, "This is my body, broken for you. Take, eat."

Nathan put the wafer in his mouth and drank the juice and bowed his head. He asked for something. He asked for mercy for what he had done to Alvin Neal even though he didn't mean it. And then other things came to mind from not too long ago and some from a very long time where he might have meant to do wrong, and he asked for mercy for those too. When he opened his eyes, he still couldn't see well, and when he looked back up at the milky white portrait he could only make out the soft edges around the face, the weak smile, and he thought *I've never known who that is. I don't aim to.* Then he looked down in front of the pulpit, at the table with the loaf torn in two and the red-filled silver cup, and that he could see. Beneath, on the side of the table, was carved DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME, struck deep in the wood in letters big enough for him to read.

When the service ended, men shook his hand and women gave him brief hugs around the neck. Thompson walked up to him from behind and squeezed his arm and said they would be praying for him and Alvin Neal and Pauline, and Nathan said, "Do, please." He stepped out of the church and stood at the top step and men talking there shuffled to the

sides of the astroturfed concrete to let him pass. Nathan realized his sight was still a bit unsure as he stepped down, the blurred men at the edges of his vision putting him in mind of the stand of dogwoods he had passed through days before. At the bottom of the steps he wiped his eyes and could see a field of wheat off behind the hump of the graveyard, imagined wheat growing there and being cut over and over again. He looked at the graveyard, closer to him, and pictured the gravestones being plucked out of the ground, granite roots and all, by a hand not his own.

VITA

Paul N. Akin Jr., or “Nat” to pretty much everyone, was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on January 17, 1969. He was raised in Germantown, Tennessee and graduated Germantown High School in 1987. He then returned to Knoxville and attended the University of Tennessee, graduating in December of 1991 with a B. A. in English and History. In the two years after graduation, he worked at Vanderbilt University for Reformed University Fellowship. For the next three, he worked at Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi, and then for another independent bookstore and publisher in the Nashville area. He returned to Memphis in 1998 and began coursework for a masters at the University of Mississippi.

He currently lives in Memphis, Tennessee. He hopes to live life well, to know that much was forgiven, and hopes in the end to hear that much was well done, by His grace.